

THE POETRY AND POETIC THEORY OF ANDRÉ BRETON,  
WITH PARTICULAR REFERENCE TO THE IMAGE

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To avoid an excessive number of footnotes the following abbreviations for certain editions of Breton's books have been employed throughout, incorporated in the text:

- M: Les Manifestes du Surréalisme, Paris: Pauvert, 1972.  
 (M 55 = p.55 of " " " " " " )
- CT: Clair de Terre, Paris: Gallimard (Coll. 'Poésie'), 1966.
- SA: Signe ascendant, Paris: Gallimard (Coll. 'Poésie'), 1968.
- CM: Les Champs magnétiques, Paris: Gallimard, 1967. (With Soupault).
- N: Nadja, Paris: Gallimard (Coll. 'Le Livre de Poche'), 1964.
- V: Les Vases communicants, Paris: Gallimard, 1967.
- AF: L'Amour fou, Paris: Gallimard, 1966.
- A: Arcane 17, Paris: Union générale d'éditions (Coll. '10/18'), 1965.
- PP: Les Pas perdus, Paris: Gallimard, 1949.
- PJ: Point du Jour, Paris: Gallimard (Coll. 'Idées'), 1970.
- CC: La Clé des Champs, Paris: Pauvert, 1967.
- PC: Perspective cavalière, Paris: Gallimard, 1970.
- SP: Le Surréalisme et la Peinture, Paris: Gallimard, 1965.
- HN: Anthologie de l'humour noir, Paris: Pauvert, 1966.
- E: Entretiens, Paris: Gallimard (Coll. 'Le Point du Jour'), 1952.
- AM: L'Art magique, Paris: Club français du livre (Coll. 'Formes et Reflets'), 1957. (With Legrand).
- RT: Ralentir Travaux, Paris: Corti, 1968. (With Char and Eluard).
- IC: L'Immaculée Conception, Paris: Seghers, 1968. (With Eluard).

## INTRODUCTION

"Une exégèse digne de ce nom étant réservée aux livres dits 'sacrés', de nos jours la poésie de haut vol qu'on prétend rendre accessible au vulgaire est traitée en objet d'enseignement et, de là, soumise au régime ultra-débilisant de l' 'explication de textes'. Il est plaisant ou confondant, selon l'humeur, d'observer — quand tous ceux qui y entendent quelque chose s'accordent à proclamer que la vertu d'un poème dépend aussi partiellement de ce qu'il 'signifie' à la lettre ou paraît signifier que celle d'un tableau de ce qu'il 'représente' — que les manuels, contraints par le courant sensible à faire de jour en jour meilleure part à des oeuvres plus ou moins hermétiques, se surchargent de plus en plus de gloses visant, coûte que coûte, à rétablir la primauté de l'intelligible sur le sensible ....." (PC 130).

Breton wrote these words in 1956 at the beginning of a text entitled Braise au trépied de Keridwen, the foreword to Jean Markale's book Les Grands Bardes gallois.<sup>1</sup> Knowing that this was Breton's sentiment, one approaches the analysis of his poetry with a certain degree of trepidation. Yet even if one can never hope to bring to the surface the full meaning of his work, it may be sufficiently rewarding to venture into its cavernous and defiant profundity and to seek out some of its secrets. Furthermore Breton has allowed elsewhere for the interpretation of Surrealist poems:

"Le surréalisme, surmontant toute préoccupation de pittoresque, passera bientôt, j'espère, à l'interprétation des textes automatiques, poèmes ou autres, qu'il couvre de son nom et dont l'apparente bizarrerie ne saura, selon moi, résister à cette épreuve." (PJ 97).

It is generally acknowledged, of course, that André Breton was the principal theoretician of the Surrealist movement; but his real importance as a poet in his own right has been, at least until fairly recently, less widely acclaimed. It is hoped that the present study may help in some small way to rectify this situation and demonstrate that Breton, in addition to being the major theorist and the

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1. Paris: Falaize-Georges Fall, 1956.



ic / major polemist of Surrealism, must be regarded, too, as one of its finest poets.

Unfortunately Breton, himself, was wont to adopt an attitude of self-deprecation towards his own work, as the following confession, part jocular, part serious, to a young admirer, Charles Duits, clearly indicates:

"Mes poèmes? Mais ils ne valent rien, cher ami! Je n'ai jamais écrit un seul vers qui me satisfait."<sup>1</sup>

These words may possibly suggest, however, why Breton's poetry is so important: it is, and it evokes, a lifelong quest for, rather paradoxically, some almost ineffable experience. If Breton was not wholly satisfied with his poems, it is surely because his conception of poetry was so lofty; and there is a hint of this fact in one of his earliest texts, La confession dédaigneuse:

"Après toutes les déceptions qu'elle m'a déjà infligées, je tiens encore la poésie pour le terrain où ont le plus de chances de se résoudre les terribles difficultés de la conscience avec la confiance, chez un même individu. C'est pourquoi je me montre, à l'occasion, si sévère pour elle, pourquoi je ne lui passe aucune abdication." (PP 15)

A cursory glance at Breton's poems should reveal at once their mercurial quality. Their themes are usually expressed in terms of brilliant, volatile images, which force the critic either to react creatively in face of the rapidly and constantly changing motifs or to close and put down the book. These motifs, themselves, in isolation, are frequently surprising, but in combination, in relationships subject to seemingly infinite modification, they are at first sight a bewildering series of puzzles, challenges and stimuli.

Though the city of Paris may recur time and time again as the

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1. In Duits, C., André Breton a-t-il dit passe, Paris: Denoël, 1969, p.166.

setting for his writings, Breton's real poetic universe is the universe of the imagination, evoked by woodland glades, frail flowers, exotic creatures, mysterious towers and castles, a world where frontiers between animal, vegetable and mineral are fluid or even nonexistent, a world where everyday objects can acquire remarkable new properties, a world where desire is king and love is queen. Indeed, even in the urban landscapes depicted in Breton's poems reality often serves as a mere springboard for the imagination.

Nobody would seriously question the prime importance of the image in these texts, but the image has been seen at one and the same time as the source of the great wonders of Surrealist poetry and also of its inherent weakness, if weakness it be, a lack of coherence. One of the most notorious descriptions of Surrealism is the one made by Louis Aragon in Le Paysan de Paris, a description which could be interpreted as a criticism:

"Le vice appelé Surréalisme est l'emploi déréglé et passionnel du stupéfiant image, ou plutôt de la provocation sans contrôle de l'image pour elle-même et pour ce qu'elle entraîne dans le domaine de la représentation de perturbations imprévisibles et de métamorphoses; car chaque image à chaque coup vous force à réviser tout l'Univers." <sup>1</sup>

This observation is particularly valid, as far as the works of André Breton are concerned, for not only do images become the fundamental elements in his poetry, but also most aspects of his system, his thought, are related in some way to the question of the image.

Breton held fairly strong views, of course, on the image, especially on its definition and function; because of this his conception of the term "image" is described and discussed at the beginning of this study; and it is because of Breton's particular concep-

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1. op. cit., Paris: Gallimard (Coll. 'Livres de Poche'), 1966, p.83.

tion of the image that this thesis does not set out to be a grammar of Surrealist metaphor. Some recent studies of the imagery of other poets have concentrated almost exclusively on analyses of various types of images: a case in point is P.W. Nesselroth's book, Lautréamont's Imagery.<sup>1</sup> The titles of the chapters of this work indicate the nature of the approach: I. Formal Similes; II. Multiple Similes; III. The Homeric Analogical Epithet; IV. Animal Similes; V. Similes Combined With Metaphors; VI. Metaphors. Though such an approach has its merits and uses, especially when applied to writers of the past, it has its disadvantages, as far as Lautréamont is concerned, in that it diverts the emphasis from the more surprising aspects of the imagery of Les Chants de Maldoror. There would be an even greater danger of this, if the same approach were adopted for a study of Breton's imagery, which cannot really be limited to formal figures of speech, even though a number of commentators have mentioned the "rhetorical" and even "classical" style of Breton's prose.

It may be argued that one can pay too much attention to a particular writer's personal conception of imagery. In Style and Theme in Reverdy's 'Les Ardoises du Toit' A. Rizzuto attacks Fongaro on these grounds:

"Having read Reverdy's aesthetic works, he (Fongaro) uses the poet's own definition of imagery to evaluate the images present in his poems. This method is unsound for two reasons: it presupposes that the poet is consistent throughout his creative career, turning him into a mere theoretician; and it restricts the freedom of the reader to react to the poem on its own terms." 2

The first objection can be countered to some extent by a chronological survey of the writer's theoretical works; and, as for the second

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1. Geneva: Droz, 1969.

2. op.cit., University, Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1971, p.99.



objection, Fongaro could presumably retort that Reverdy's conception of imagery was not entirely without connection with his poems and that there was nothing to stop the reader going on to react to the poem "on its own terms" in his own way. Indeed, it is probably more dangerous to ignore completely the poet's own conception and definition of imagery, even if one eventually concludes that his remarks on the image or his classifications of images are inadequate.

Studies of Surrealism should also bear in mind that members of the movement had a somewhat idiosyncratic view of "La Poésie". In this respect the following observation, published in 1945 by Breton's most loyal friend and ally, Benjamin Péret, in the provocative text, Le Déshonneur des Poètes, should be remembered:

"Si l'on recherche la signification originelle de la poésie, aujourd'hui dissimulée sous les mille cripeaux de la société, on constate qu'elle est le véritable souffle de l'homme, la source de toute connaissance et cette connaissance elle-même sous son aspect le plus immaculé. En elle se condense toute la vie spirituelle de l'humanité depuis qu'elle a commencé de prendre conscience de sa nature: en elle palpitent maintenant ses plus hautes créations et, terre à jamais féconde, elle garde perpétuellement en réserve les cristaux incolores et les moissons de demain." 1

On the basis of this famous profession of faith Jean-Louis Bédouin, one of the post-war recruits to the Surrealist set, makes the vital deduction:

"De ce point de vue, il est manifeste que la poésie excède en tous sens le cadre du poème — si libre qu'on le veuille et si dégagé de toute littérature. Cette poésie-souffle de l'homme, dont la conception laisse loin derrière elle celle d'une 'poésie de la Nature' qui n'a que trop servi, ne saurait, à peine de se nier, s'identifier exclusivement à la poésie qui se peut écrire. Activité de l'esprit, on voit mal comment celle-ci n'aurait loisir de s'exercer que par le truchement du vers (libre ou non), de la prose (rythmée ou non), ou même de quelque autre moyen emprunté aux arts, quand c'est à toute heure, et non moins dans le sommeil

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1. Reprinted in Bédouin, J.-L., Benjamin Péret, Paris: Seghers (Coll. 'Poètes d'aujourd'hui'), 1961, p.179.



qu'à l'état de veille, et non moins chez le savant que chez l'ignorant, que se produit cette circulation entre le monde extérieur et le monde intérieur qui fait notre vie mentale et que Breton a comparée pour sa part au jeu de vases communicants." <sup>1</sup>

This is an absolutely fundamental tenet of Surrealism. Similarly, one should try to remember Roman Jakobson's advice that

".....Celui qui étudierait la métaphore chez les surréalistes pourrait difficilement passer sous silence la peinture de Max Ernst ou les films de Luis Buñuel, L'Age d'or et Le Chien Andalou. Bref, de nombreux traits poétiques relèvent non seulement de la science du langage, mais de l'ensemble de la théorie des signes, autrement dit, de la sémiologie(ou sémiotique) générale." <sup>2</sup>

Unfortunately, this study must inevitably concentrate largely on the written manifestations of Breton's poetry, but not merely on his "poèmes", though there will be the occasional reference to Surrealist art. Breton, himself, would regard a number of his prose-works as being just as much poetry as, for example, L'Air de l'Eau. In an interview with Guy Dumur in 1964 Breton made this revealing remark:

"La poésie proprement dite, tout comme celle qui de nos jours irrigue comme jamais les arts plastiques, doit à tout prix faire respecter son sens original, étymologique. De tout temps, sous toutes les latitudes, c'est elle qui a commandé le réseau sensitif de l'homme et elle ne saurait sans trahison précisément envers l'homme, renoncer à aucune de ses prérogatives. Une fois pour toutes, Rimbaud a dégagé mais d'autant accru la responsabilité du poète: 'Si ce qu'il rapporte de là-bas a forme, il donne forme; si c'est informe, il donne de l'informe.' Que dans cette phrase il ait souligné les mots 'là-bas' montre assez que c'est en eux que tout réside." (PC 233)

Distinctions based on form are of no great import for Breton. The important distinction, in the eyes of the Surrealists, is the one formulated admirably by Tzara between "poésie-activité de l'esprit" and "poésie-moyen d'expression".<sup>3</sup> Breton wished to create, and has created, a new kind of poetry and he helped to evolve a new conception

*La Poésie surréaliste*

1. Reprinted in Bédouin, J.-L., Benjamin Péret, Paris: Seghers (Coll. 'Poètes d'aujourd'hui'), 1964, p.20.
2. Essais de linguistique générale, traduit et préfacé par N. Ruwet, Paris: Edns de Minuit, 1963, p.210.
3. In Le Surréalisme A.S.D.L.R., No. 4, Paris, Déc. 1931.

of the image.

Discussions of surrealist imagery have tended to revolve around Breton's famous observations on the image and his list of "Surrealist images" in the first Manifeste du Surréalisme.<sup>1</sup> As a prelude to the present study a brief survey of some of the more important studies of Breton's poetry, especially the ones which discuss his poetics and his imagery, will help to set it in its context.

The most substantial and the most significant contributions both to Breton studies in general and to Breton's imagery in particular have been made by Professor Balakian, beginning not so much with her Literary Origins of Surrealism<sup>2</sup> but with Surrealism: the Road to the Absolute;<sup>3</sup> its seventh chapter, entitled "The surrealist image", is centred around Breton's classification of surrealist images, though Professor Balakian merges two of Breton's categories (the image which "tire d'elle-même une justification formelle dérisoire" and the one which "déchaîne le rire") under the broad heading, "all images that provoke laughter". Her comments on these types of images are, in fact, very sketchy, and it is in the remainder of the chapter that one finds the most valuable observations: on the Surrealists' study of the word and language and their enrichment of the active vocabulary of poetry, on syntax or sentence structure, on the use of the simplest of verbs, which "permit the loosest form of bonds between nouns", on the suppression of words of transition such as ainsi, donc, or, and the like, and their replacement by juxtaposition and apposition, on the images which result from the association of

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1. Paris: Edns du Sagittaire chez Simon Kra, 1924.

2. New York: King's Crown Press, 1947.

3. New York: Noonday Press, 1959; revised and enlarged, London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1972.

one metaphor with another, on the discovery that poetry was "a different type of intellectual activity (from prose), consisting of what one might call mental deviation and linguistic alchemy".

Then, in an article, Metaphor and metamorphosis in André Breton's Poetics,<sup>1</sup> concerned, in fact, far more with the principle or theme of metamorphosis than with metaphor, she gives a fascinating, if brief, survey of the fundamental aspects, illustrated by a handful of quotations from Breton's poems. This article was the real starting-point for her major study, André Breton, Magus of Surrealism,<sup>2</sup> which began the more detailed exploration of the elements of hermeticism in Breton's poetry. Even the latter work, comprehensive and illuminating as it is, still leaves considerable scope for further exploration of Breton's poetry, even along similar lines. This is suggested by Anna Balakian's references to the intricacy of Breton's imagery and the vast numbers of new metaphors he has created in her crucially important description and summary of his poetry:

"First of all Breton has thrown away the entire vocabulary of poetry and created a new one. His words are harsh, unpoetic, because many of them have never been pronounced orally; they are part of a silent, very precise, particularized vocabulary that is in the passive-recognition level of most French readers and not in normal literary usage. A scientific man, widely read in diverse materials, he uses as poetic language the terminology of the biologist, the geologist, the physicist, the botanist. His images are thus plunged deep into reality even as the magician's in contrast with the mystic's. In showing the distinction, Eliphas Lévi said the 'sphere of material experience is that of his knowledge'. Breton replenished the exhausted metaphoric scale of the French poet. There are enough new poetic metaphors in Breton's poetry to last for the next two centuries. The poetic advantage of his erudite vocabulary is that no traditional and worn-out images are associated with this fresh set of nouns. Whereas Mallarmé thought that the bouquet suggesting the absence of any particular flower was more widely evocative than a concrete description of an individual flower, Breton proceeds from the opposite position that the designating, nondescribed noun, per-

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1. French Studies, Vol. XIX, I (Jan. 1965), pp.34-41.  
 2. New York: Oxford University Press, 1971.



taining to a rare generic category, not of species but of sub-species, has a wider and freer range of association in its concreteness and freedom from previous poetic use.

It is a poetry that is hard on the eyes because of its harsh, most irregular disposition on the page. It is longwinded, crowded, with sudden breaks in the concussion of words one on the other, like a crack in a wall that lets the light suddenly flow in. It doesn't sing but it echoes image upon image as the organ emits in its rich chords, sound upon sound. Each image contains not one possible connection of realities, but many on various levels. It is hermetic but strictly syntactical, leaving doors ajar for multiple interpretations. When you read Breton, you wander through a Gothic, primeval forest filled with trails, all leading to a certain burst of light.

His imagery is constructed with the intricacy of a labyrinth, new chambers are revealed with every rereading, and new difficulties of meaning. As he calls life a cryptogram, so is his poetry....." 1

As she no doubt realized, if one attempts to study the images in Breton's poetry from the point of view of their form, one does not proceed very far. One resorts to lists of examples; one touches merely the shell, when it is the kernel which must be savoured. In fact, this is precisely the approach of Breton in his criticism, as Anna Balakian observes:

"In the First Manifesto, Breton lists the various types of imagery utilized by surrealist poets in their effort to grasp new relationships between disparate realities. But nowhere does he discuss poets and their uses of the poetic structure; when he talks of them, he discusses content and their philosophical orientation, even as in his art criticism it is metaphysical approach that interests him rather than specific techniques." 2

It can be inferred from this that one of the reasons why Breton never attempted to produce an exhaustive classification of surrealist images is that he was not really interested in such a formal approach.

In the final part of the present study, when the nature and role of the image in Breton's poetry are examined, the emphasis will likewise be on the content. The intention is to expand Anna Balakian's study of Breton's poetry, by considering in greater detail and

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1. Balakian, A., André Breton, pp.127-128.

2. ibid., p.126.



in greater intensity the particular question of the imagery.

Clifford Browder, in André Breton, Arbiter of Surrealism,<sup>1</sup> a sound general "life and work" study, devotes the tenth and last chapter to "The Writer", where, as a brief starting-point to the compilation of Breton's "poetic universe", he has drawn up a list of the allusions to marine life, animals, birds, insects, plants and flowers, "inanimate substances", and adds:

"The imagery of this poetry embraces a wide variety of tangible natural phenomena. Like Bosch, Breton builds his merveilleux with elements of the real world."<sup>2</sup>

As far as other aspects of the vocabulary of Breton's poetry are concerned, he makes the following observation:

"Images of whiteness, light, and transparency predominate in this poetry, where the word noir, so common in the prose, is rarely found. Among the nouns most often used one notes feu, flamme, lumière, lustre, brillant, soleil, étoile, verre, glace, miroir, diamant, cristal, prisme, oeuf, coquille and coquillage, neige, eau, and rosée. References to crystals are particularly frequent....."<sup>3</sup>

Although Clifford Browder does not draw any conclusions about this list, the obvious inference one can make is that images of fire, light and transparency dominate; and we feel that they serve to evoke the poet's flashes of insight and illumination.

A little earlier Clifford Browder mentions what he considers to be another type of surrealist image:

"But often the poet does not even use two objects, producing the surréal by merely assigning an unaccustomed color (especially blue) to the phenomenon involved: lait bleu, serpents bleus, sang devenu vert, paupières bleues, rosée noire, miel bleu, loup vert ..... To further heighten the merveilleux, a conflict of colors may be introduced: soleil blanc et noir, cristal bleu comme les blés, rouge comme l'oeuf quand il est vert.....; in such cases the irrational and contradictory nature of the surréal is especially apparent."<sup>4</sup>

1. Geneva: Droz, 1967.

2. Browder, C., André Breton, Arbiter of Surrealism, p.159.

3. ibid., pp.160-161.

4. ibid., p.158.

The word "loup", however, in the context of the poem Guerre (SA 59), is surely to be understood as meaning "mask", not "wolf".

The third American scholar to consider is Mary Ann Caws, who has followed Surrealism and the Literary Imagination: a Study of Breton and Bachelard,<sup>1</sup> which is more concerned with the immediate precursors of Surrealism and with Bachelard, although there is a section on the image (pp.58-64), and The Poetry of Dada and Surrealism: Aragon, Breton, Tzara, Eluard and Desnos,<sup>2</sup> with a short work, André Breton,<sup>3</sup> in which two chapters, the third, Word and Image: "à la lumière de l'image", and the ninth, Poetry: "lieu de reconciliation", are the most relevant to our field. The chapter on "Word and Image" is very general and very introductory, but the chapter on "Poetry", commencing with advice on "reading a surrealist poem", does start to discuss problems of individual images and to explore the connection between the alchemy of the word and the Surrealist endeavour, by illustrating certain key phrases, such as "l'alphabet secret de la toute-nécessité", "le cristal noir" and "Et mouvement encore". The results are rewarding, but are once more merely a beginning.

In the introduction of her previous book, The Poetry of Dada and Surrealism, she points out that she follows themes and images rather than chronological lines and suggests that she operates basically around the concepts of polarity, ambiguity, doubling and dialectic, and the themes of "alternation and linking, exaltation and ennui, game". The section devoted to Breton examines poetry as "fusion and extension", "a miraculous widening of experience",

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1. The Hague and Paris: Mouton, 1966.

2. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1970.

3. New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1971.

studies a few images of doubling and distance, evokes the atmosphere of anticipation, presence and unity, the attitudes of openness and responsibility, before concluding with a couple of pages on "the ambiguity of the Surrealist adventure", seen in its extremes of exaltation and despair and in the vagueness of the terms used in Breton's theory and criticism — "révélation", "interrogation", "sollicitation", "création", "représentation", "figuration". This thematic approach gives an impression of the real flavour and content of Breton's poetry, but again is by no means exhaustive. Mrs. Caws' work complements Professor Balakian's, but there is still almost infinite room for further research and criticism, both from the chronological angle and from that of image-themes.

J.H. Matthews' André Breton<sup>1</sup> is basically a very succinct survey of some of the poet's works, but it makes the point that the poetic image does not only deny explanation, it defies it (p.32). In his Surrealist Poetry in France<sup>2</sup> Breton is discussed only in the introduction.

As for studies in French, two basic types are relevant: firstly, general works on Surrealism which have a section or observations on the image, secondly, the major books on Breton.

(a) Comments on the image in general works on Surrealism.

Robert Bréchon, in the section entitled "De la métaphore au symbole" of his book, Le Surréalisme,<sup>3</sup> lists what he regards as the basic types of images found in Surrealist poetry. He claims, quite rightly, that Surrealist poets have always used the simile; he mentions juxtaposition and cites examples provided by Eluard's Blason

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1. New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1967.

2. Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1969.

3. Paris: Armand Colin, 1971.



des fleurs et des fruits:

"Glycine robe de fumée  
... Digitale cristal soyeux  
Lilas lèvres multipliées..."<sup>1</sup>

These are, of course, appositions, albeit slightly complex ones in that they involve not just two nouns, but a noun and a nominal phrase. Under the same rubric, but distinct from the metaphor, he places the type of image in which the two terms are linked by a "copule", exemplified for him in "les aphorismes naïfs en forme d'équations de Sens plastique de Malcolm de Chazal: 'Les vallées sont les soutiens-gorge du vent...'; 'La rose, c'est les dents de lait du soleil...'; 'La couleur est le chausse-pied de l'oeil...', etc."<sup>2</sup> Bréchon feels that such figures are intermediary between the simile and the metaphor, though the simple copula formula would normally be regarded, of course, as the basic metaphor.<sup>3</sup>

Breton, himself, was struck by the frequency in the automatic texts of images in which the two terms are linked by the preposition "à". Bréchon next mentions a similar type of image, in which the preposition "de" effects the link:

"C'est là un type de figure dont la poésie précieuse de l'époque classique a fait grand usage. Le surréalisme, qui l'a retrouvée, semble se l'être appropriée, tellement la métaphore est conforme à sa nature profonde, faisant du discours poétique cette suite de propositions où la préposition de introduit un rapport de comparaison tout à fait caractéristique." <sup>4</sup>

Amongst the examples Bréchon quotes is a whole series from the pen of Breton:

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1. Bréchon, R., Le Surréalisme, p.168.
  2. ibid.
  3. Christine Brooke-Rose, in her book, A Grammar of Metaphor (London: Secker & Warburg, 1958), regards the copula as one of the five main types of noun metaphor.
  4. Bréchon, R., Le Surréalisme, p.168.



"Treuil du temps....  
 ... le crêpe des significations parfaites....  
 Le satin des pages qu'on tourne dans les livres....  
 ... le pain du soleil....  
 ... la neige de l'avoir trouvée....  
 ... l'adorable déshabillée de l'eau....  
 Draps amande de ma vie....  
 ... le perron du château de la violence....  
 ... le pommier en fleur de la mer....  
 ... le précipice  
 De la fusion sans espoir de ta présence et de ton absence  
 La lampe de mon coeur...." 1

Some of these examples, of course, are hardly genuine images: one has to separate the unavoidable genitive from the genitival metaphor. In any case, the genitival metaphor is by no means new, and indeed, Christine Brooke-Rose claims that "the genitive link forms the largest group among noun metaphors."<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps a more interesting category devised by Robert Bréchon stems from the distinction he makes between the image and the metaphor:

"Le troisième degré de la comparaison est l'image proprement dite, qui est une métaphore tronquée. Il n'y a plus rapprochement de deux termes, mais substitution de l'un à l'autre. On cite souvent comme exemple d'image surréaliste typique celle du poème Au regard des divinités, d'André Breton:

Sur le pont, à la même heure

Ainsi la rosée à tête de chatte se berçait.

Il est évident qu'ici, il est impossible de savoir clairement quels sont les termes de la comparaison. Est-ce la rosée qui évoque la chatte ou la chatte qui évoque la rosée? En fait, le rapprochement des deux termes de l'image n'a pas pour fonction de suggérer une identité entre eux, mais d'établir un rapport par lequel un être surréel, ici 'la rosée à tête de chatte' est inféré, sans qu'on puisse dire ce qu'il est. La signification de l'image, dans ce cas, n'est pas déduite de la comparaison entre deux termes, mais induite de leur rapport. Autrement dit, l'élément intellectuel qui subsistait dans la comparaison et dans la métaphore, élément qui est de nature allégorique, disparaît complètement dans l'image surréaliste authentique. On peut tenter d'expliquer une métaphore comme 'le treuil du temps', ou de la traduire, mais ce n'est plus possible quand il s'agit de 'la rosée à tête de chatte'." 3

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1. Bréchon, R., Le Surréalisme, p.169.
  2. A Grammar of Metaphor, p.147.
  3. Bréchon, R., Le Surréalisme, pp.169-170.

Breton cited "la rosée à tête de chatte" in his list of surrealist images in the first Manifeste as an example of the image of a hallucinatory order; he classed it according to its quality or its content. The strange hybrid creature becomes part of the surrealist bestiary. Although there is clearly a difference between the image and the metaphor, when they are envisaged in the way that Bréchon envisages them, Breton never attached much importance to such a distinction.

Bréchon then makes the important point, of which Breton was very much aware, that it is not really ever a question of comparison in the most characteristic surrealist images but rather of an "écart" between the two terms involved.

Bréchon next decides to approach the question from a different angle and discerns three sorts of images in contemporary poetry:

"Les unes sont surréalistes, mais leur degré d'absurdité est tel qu'il leur ôte toute intelligibilité et qu'elles sont donc manquées: le 'vêtement en cerf-volant de miel glacé' ou 'le chocolat /qui bouleverse le paysage/ à la manière d'un soulier percé' sont pourtant des exemples empruntés à deux des surréalistes les plus célèbres. D'autres images sont trop satisfaisantes pour l'esprit et l'étincelle poétique ne s'y produit pas parce que, dit Breton, la différence de potentiel existe à peine, ce qui est le cas, selon lui, pour des images comme celles de Jules Renard. Mais des poètes du groupe surréaliste ont écrit: 'Ton corps faisant du lit le ciel...', 'Les toits sont couverts d'anthracite ...', qui sont presque des figures classiques. La troisième catégorie est celle des images à la fois absurdes et signifiantes, telles qu'on en trouve chez des surréalistes qui ont le plus de 'talent'." <sup>1</sup>

And amongst his examples of this third category Bréchon cites the following images by Breton:

"Ma femme à la chevelure de feu de bois...  
Le soleil chien couchant....  
L'aubépine de la pluie....  
La lueur bleue qui relie les coups de hache du bûcheron...." <sup>2</sup>

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1. Bréchon, R., Le Surréalisme, pp.172-173.

2. ibid., p.173.

Although it is unsatisfactory merely to list such images and although certain of them will be analysed in the final part of this study, at least as much importance will be attached there to the examination of the role they play in the structure of Breton's poems; and Bréchon's next point makes a slight move in that direction:

"On aura remarqué que j'ai dû le plus souvent citer, non une image simple, mais une image complexe ou même une suite d'images. On trouve sans cesse dans la poésie surréaliste des images, c'est-à-dire des figures où les termes de la 'comparaison' sont eux-mêmes des figures métaphoriques. On saisit mieux, en essayant de les interpréter, le caractère essentiel de l'image surréaliste, qui est d'être symbolique. Je veux dire par là non pas qu'elle exprime un signifié précis (on a vu que la symbolique surréaliste n'est pas un langage chiffré), mais qu'elle traduit une vision du monde assez commune pour que le lecteur puisse y retrouver l'écho de sa propre expérience, assez originale aussi pour qu'il y trouve un enrichissement de son propre univers intérieur." <sup>1</sup>

To illustrate this final point Bréchon mentions Breton's poem La moindre rançon, which evokes Chile, and which will be discussed in detail in due course. His brief comments on the symbolic aspects of Surrealism are the starting-point for our study of an important aspect of surrealist imagery; and, as far as his first point is concerned, the first thing which strikes the reader, when he looks at an automatic text or a poem by Breton, is the intricate network of images. Most of Breton's poems are patchwork collections of images of all varieties, often completely unrelated to each other, at least on first reading. At times blocks of images, revolving around the same axis, evoking the same sensation or impression, are to be discerned, and these image-clusters become the important elements in the structure of a poem.

C. Abastado, in his Introduction au surréalisme,<sup>2</sup> devotes six pages to "l'image verbale", beginning by pointing out the ambiguity of the word "image":

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1. Bréchon, R., Le Surréalisme, p.174.

2. Paris-Montreal: Bordas (Coll. 'Etudes'), 1971.



"C'est un des termes les plus flous de la psychologie comme de l'esthétique. Il peut désigner un contenu psychique lié à la perception ou à la mémoire: la représentation mentale et sa transcription verbale. Il indique également une création phantasmatique et la synthèse verbale, l'association par la syntaxe d'éléments sans lien dans la réalité. En fait, les deux sens du mot sont difficilement séparables: la représentation du perçu est une élaboration psychique complexe à partir des données de la sensation; le souvenir n'est pas la reproduction du vécu, mais une construction qui donne un sens à l'expérience passée; la perception et la mémoire sont des démarches particulières de l'imagination.....

..... Dans le langage, les représentations de la perception et de la mémoire exploitent le lexique codifié; souvent, au contraire, les images créées, les phantasmes s'appuient sur une syntaxe minimale ou des translations sémantiques: ce sont les 'figures de mots' de l'ancienne rhétorique. L'analyse littéraire, en renonçant à cette rhétorique — ou en cessant de la nommer — à la suite des romantiques, entretient une confusion de la terminologie critique. Mais lorsqu'ils définissent une théorie de l'image verbale, les surréalistes pensent surtout aux phantasmes et aux 'figures de mots'." 1

Though reference to the meaning of the term "image" in psychology may at first sight seem to complicate the issue unduly, Breton's deep interest in that science undoubtedly has some bearing on his conception of the poetic image, modifying and possibly enlarging more traditional definitions.

Abastado's comments, however, are basically a résumé of what Breton wrote about the image in the Manifeste, though he does find, in some cases, neater expressions: "l'occultation (d'un des deux termes)", "la déception brutale de l'effet", "le jeu verbal", "le paradoxe", "le non-sens", "l'humour". Abastado regards Breton's classification as systematic, if undeveloped; but "systematic" is rather a sweeping term. He goes on to make some interesting comments on the "poème-image", though they are largely inspired by Eluard's observations.

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1. Abastado, C., Introduction au surréalisme, p.81.

Situated roughly half-way between the comments on the image in general surveys of Surrealism and the major studies devoted to Breton's writing is an important essay by Marc Eigeldinger devoted to the surrealist image, L'art de brûler la chandelle par les deux bouts,<sup>1</sup> which takes its title from a couple of lines of Breton's poem, Les Etats généraux. Eigeldinger discusses the implications of Breton's use of the word "coïncidences" rather than "correspondances", claiming that the former notion excludes logic and rational criteria and relies on the "toute-puissance du hasard et de l'immédiat". He then considers synaesthesia: after suggesting that when it is encountered in Baudelaire's poems, one usually has the impression of a consciously produced effect and that it becomes more subtle and spontaneous with Rimbaud, Eigeldinger gives his opinion on the synaesthesia in Breton's poetry:

"..... chez Breton elle atteint souvent à une plénitude due aux efflorescences subites de l'automatisme. Les sens de la vue et de l'ouïe, de l'odorat et du toucher sont reliés les uns aux autres par une sorte de fluide électrique. Sur le plan de la représentation verbale, les images visuelles s'associent instantanément à des notations auditives ou olfactives, de telle sorte qu'une véritable participation s'établit entre les ordres de la sensibilité. La fusion des éléments visuels et auditifs est si totale qu'elle suscite la perception de l'objet imaginaire." <sup>2</sup>

Eigeldinger shows briefly how the surrealist image plays its role in the conciliation of contraries, by which Breton sets considerable store, and refers to these particular aspects:

"..... par le moyen des coïncidences fortuites elle (l'image) associe le sujet à l'objet, l'esprit à la matière, le conscient à l'inconscient. Elle établit entre l'abstrait et le concret un lien analogique, indestructible. Le moi psychique est relié au monde extérieur, la représentation mentale et la perception se confondent de telle sorte que l'idée et l'image cessent de

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1. In Eigeldinger, M. (ed.), André Breton, Essais et Témoignages, Neuchâtel, Ed. de la Baconnière, 1970, pp.175-206.

2. ibid., p.193.

s'opposer ou de se nuire. La métaphore surréaliste matérialise la pensée, elle l'objective dans le champ illimité d'un espace à quatre dimensions." 1

One could perhaps even categorize surrealist imagery according to a kind of dialectic system, in which the surreal would be born of the fusion of the abstract and the concrete, or the animate and the inanimate, or dream and reality. Such a pattern would, however, be far from complete. Eigeldinger continues, in fact, in similar vein:

"L'image devient un instrument dialectique, permettant de réduire l'écart, si considérable soit-il, entre deux objets et de reconcilier les réalités antinomiques. Elle a la propriété d'abolir les distances, de vaincre la contradiction par sa vertu de synthèse." 2

Eigeldinger rightly stresses Breton's preoccupation with myth:

"L'oeuvre d'André Breton tend de plus en plus à 'répondre à la sollicitation éternelle des symboles et des mythes'. Elle s'attache aux phénomènes de symbolisation dans le monde pour en donner une interprétation mythique." 3

The role played by the image in this process will be seen to be primordial.

(b) Books wholly devoted to Breton.

The first to appear was Julien Gracq's André Breton: quelques aspects de l'écrivain.<sup>4</sup> In this penetrating and perceptive study Gracq not only lists what he regards as the key-words in Breton's writings: the adjective "noir"; the series "courant", "sensible", "magnétique", "électif", "désorientant", "aimanté", "champ", "conducteur"; the "grandes constellations fixes" — "l'amour, le rêve" —; the "grandes figures symboliques" — "le Rêve incarné", "l'Amour unique", "le Château Périlleux", "la Femme enfant", "la Gardienne du

1. Eigeldinger, M., André Breton, Essais et Témoignages, p.194.

2. ibid., p.200.

3. ibid., p.196.

4. Paris: Corti, 1948.



secret", "la Quête" —, he also attempts the more difficult task of evoking their tonality. Though he refers to the "jaillissement déracinant de l'image", he is more interested in the word and devotes an interesting section to Breton's device of italicizing certain words. One has the feeling, however, that Gracq picks out for comment, no doubt subconsciously, themes and features which are hallmarks of his own style, together with preoccupations which he, himself, shares. This may be one of the reasons why Gracq is far more interested in Breton's prose-style, to the extent of claiming that the poems are "pour une bonne part manqués".<sup>1</sup> He is fascinated by Breton's syntax:

"Cette phrase, ample, longue, sinueuse, fertile en incidentes, en rebondissements et en échos intérieurs, faite pour tenir à travers ses méandres l'attention en suspens et en incertitude jusqu'à sa résolution finale d'où n'est presque jamais absent un élément de surprise — constitue probablement l'apport le plus riche de Breton à la langue." <sup>2</sup>

He sees "cette carcasse de prose classique" as merely a piece of "trompe-l'oeil", "une croûte mince entièrement rongée de l'intérieur par un flux insolite de poésie" (p.146). This raises again the whole problem of what is meant by "Poésie" in Breton's case, but the basic task left to the critic by Gracq is the parallel exploration of the poems proper.

The following year saw the publication of Claude Mauriac's essay, André Breton,<sup>3</sup> divided into five parts: "la Révolution", "l'Au-delà", "le Réel", "le Surréal" and "l'Amour". Though Mauriac suspects that Breton is a great poet, he confesses he had not yet learnt to understand the poems and consequently is more prepared to recognize Breton's merit as a prose-poet. Mauriac attaches too much

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1. op.cit., 1970 edition, p.98.

2. ibid., p.147.

3. Paris: Edns de Flore, 1949.

importance to automatic writing and fails to evoke the qualities of Breton, the poet. The essay is, in fact, more a discussion of Breton's ideas than a study of his writings. At times Mauriac is quite critical, perhaps with reason, but he is a shade too rational in his approach, ever ready to seize upon what he regards as contradictions and inconsistencies, even though apparent contradiction is one of the guiding principles in Breton's imagery. At one point he expresses surprise that Breton should not have advanced "au delà de la parole et de l'image", by turning to the cinema, which he considers to be the most suitable art-form for Surrealism. Breton's real instrument, however, was, of course, the Word, the Verb; this is absolutely fundamental. Yet, as this long essay was completed in the same year (1948) as the publication of Poèmes, it was probably too early for any but the most gifted of critics to take in the message of that volume.

Jean-Louis Bédouin's André Breton<sup>1</sup> begins as an apologia for the Surrealist movement and its aims in the post-war period, continues by evoking the qualities of Breton as its key figure and then in the brief third and final part, inspired by the publication of Poèmes, attacks the then current tendency to claim that Breton is a "poète en prose" and sees the Ode à Charles Fourier as the

"confirmation éclatante de l'espoir que nous avons toujours mis dans un mode d'expression dont la volonté de signifier n'exclut pas l'appréhension directe, fulgurante, de l'objet signifié, mais au contraire s'y mêle en une identité parfaite." <sup>2</sup>

Michel Carrouges' André Breton et les données fondamentales du surréalisme,<sup>3</sup> though recognized by members of the Surrealist group

1. Paris: Seghers (Coll. 'Poètes d'aujourd'hui'), 1950.

2. op.cit., (1970 edition), p.61.

3. Paris: Gallimard, 1950.

as one of the better books on Surrealism, was criticized by J-L. Bédouin as being "très orienté",<sup>1</sup> because there is no mention of the "situation politique du surréalisme". The book is divided into seven parts: I. La genèse du surréalisme; II. Esotérisme et surréalisme; III. Désintégration et réintégration mentales; IV. L'écriture automatique; V. La peinture et les objets surréalistes; VI. Le hasard objectif; VII. Le surréalisme et la science. It is rather more a study of "les données fondamentales du surréalisme" than of André Breton, and Carrouges himself acknowledges this in his Post-scriptum, where he admits, too, that he has ignored, for the moment, the "problèmes de l'illumination et de l'expression poétiques, ceux des rapports de la poésie et de la révolution, du symbolisme et de l'automatisme", though, in fact, he has devoted a considerable section to automatic writing. Though based to a large extent on Breton's writings, it is more a survey and discussion of Breton's thought than a study of his poetry, and in this respect it is similar to Claude Mauriac's essay and to Ferdinand Alquié's Philosophie du surréalisme.<sup>2</sup> This latter text is largely devoted to Breton, but, as Alquié explains in his Avant-propos, he did not concern himself with "l'étude des techniques du surréalisme", what one might call its "esthétique" or its "poétique". The book contains four principal chapters: I. Le Projet surréaliste; II. La Révolte et la Révolution; III. L'Attente et l'Interprétation des Signes; IV. L'Imagination. The third chapter, which might appear to be particularly significant, is disappointing: it never really gets to grips with the implications of its title and even strays from its principal subject. This book is, however, an

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1. Vingt ans de surréalisme, Paris: Edns Denoël, 1961, p.176.

2. Paris: Flammarion, 1955.



interesting presentation of Breton's thought, and compares and contrasts it with the ideas of a number of Europe's major philosophers.

Victor Crastre's André Breton<sup>1</sup> is a sympathetic and basically chronological study of Breton's ideas, though it does not discuss Breton's works in any detail, save for Nadja, and almost totally ignores the poems. He does, however, devote a later work to Nadja, Les Vases communicants and L'Amour fou.<sup>2</sup> One of the more significant aspects of André Breton is the brief comparison Crastre makes, like Gracq before him, between the ideas of Bergson and Breton, going so far as to claim that "Bergson se situe parfois si près du surréalisme qu'il semble en avoir prévu les postulats essentiels".<sup>3</sup>

P. de Massot's André Breton le Septembriseur<sup>4</sup> is just a tribute to the poet, sprinkled with a few choice quotations from Breton's works.

Philippe Audoin's passionately lucid Breton,<sup>5</sup> highly regarded in France, is basically in the format of "l'homme et l'oeuvre", though the opening chapter on the "life" is entitled "Les Travaux et les Jours" and the "work" section is subdivided into two main parts, "L'Oeuvre" and "Les Livres". Thematic in approach, exploring the ideas of "Sur les brisées", "Limites non frontières de la réalité", "la Quête", "A ce prix" and "Prolongement", the former is the better of them; the latter consists of very brief résumés of Breton's books, which reduce them to their essentials and, in some cases, to Audoin's snap judgments of them, and which do not really do them justice.

1. Paris: Arcanes, 1952.

2. Trilogie surréaliste, Paris: Société d'édition d'enseignement supérieur, 1971.

3. op. cit., p.168.

4. Paris: Eric Losfeld, 1967.

5. Paris: Gallimard, 1970.

The most recent study of Breton to appear is the one by Gérard Durozoi and Bernard Lecherbonnier, André Breton: l'écriture surréaliste,<sup>1</sup> the principal aim of which is to seek to "déceler comment fonctionne l'écriture d'André Breton" (p.9). For the most part it is an interesting, conceptual study of Breton, the writer; it contains an analysis of the more linguistic approach of Riffaterre and Meschonnic to Breton's intentions and achievements; it makes the point that "le travail effectué par les Surréalistes n'est pas un travail sur le langage, mais dans le langage." (p.99); and claims that "tous les recueils de Breton, presque tous ses poèmes, sont des discours poétiques sur sa poésie." (p.106). Though there are some perceptive observations on images in a few of Breton's poems in the recueils up to and including L'Air de l'Eau and on Breton's use of myth in Arcane 17, the most fascinating discoveries have been made in the section on Nadja, where there are very detailed glosses. The thoughtful concluding chapter, entitled "Qui écrit et pour qui?", contains a few general comments on the surrealist image, including the point that the "arbitrary" surrealist image is "plurivoque, ouverte" (p.243) and that "les images y (dans le texte surréaliste) sont telles que leur sens symbolique est en effet indéfiniment renouvelable pour chaque lecteur nouveau, chez qui elles résonnent de manière inédite". (p.246)

So, though there has been considerable discussion of Breton's ideas, it is in the area of his poetry that much work still remains to be done.

Although we take the Manifeste as our real starting-point, we are a little more sceptical about the originality and the value of

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1. Paris: Larousse (Coll. 'Thèmes et Textes'), 1974.

its section on the poetic image. We feel that not sufficient stress has been laid by certain critics on the fact that Breton did point out in 1924 that his list of surrealist images was merely provisional. In any case rigid classifications almost always run the risk of excluding important elements, and with surrealist imagery in particular it is possibly dangerous, if not necessarily absurd, to attempt too consistently to reduce the illogical to the logical, the fanciful to the rational. Despite the basic intention and appearance of the first Manifeste, Breton's contributions in the field of poetics tend to be expressed as sudden flashes of insight, albeit sometimes dogmatic ones, rather than as systematic surveys. This is probably the reason why his pronouncements on imagery, though they are extremely important, still leave a lot unsaid and do not suffice as commentaries on the images in his poems. This was perhaps inevitable, given Breton's modesty about his own poems. The provisional list of surrealist images in the first Manifeste will be shown to be inadequate to describe, evoke or portray the imagery in Breton's poetry, which becomes a vast symphony of themes, motifs and devices, both conventional and surprising, both traditional and new. It is really a mistake to try to classify Breton's imagery, as Henri Meschonnic suggests, when he talks of

".... le caractère illusoire des inventaires systématiques qui voudraient relever toutes les images d'un auteur, ou d'une catégorie de textes dans une période...." <sup>1</sup>

The solution may be quite simply to discuss the occasional image which seems to shed a particular light on a poem or other writing. This thesis will therefore pass, quite deliberately, from the

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1. Pour la poétique, Paris: Gallimard (Coll. 'Le Chemin'), 1970, p.104, note 1.



occasional formal analysis (grammar of metaphor) to lexicology, to biographical allusion, and so forth, in the hope that the whole will be a more accurate evocation and description of Breton's poetry, and particularly of Breton's imagery, for we have found in the preparation of this study that it is almost futile to produce lists of different kinds of surrealist images, whether such lists be based on form or on content. Such an approach gives a very false impression of Breton's poems: one loses not only a lot of the delicacy of individual images but also the intricacy of their interplay, and it is difficult to demonstrate particular developments, particular changes in style and emphasis. Classifications have to be seen in their proper perspective.

The importance Breton attaches to the image seems to vary to some extent as he grows older, and likewise his views on the nature of the surrealist image change from time to time. The implications of these variations remain a basic concern of this study. Hence a primarily chronological approach is adopted in the principal sections: the theoretical background, the prose-narratives, the recueils, the long poems of the 1940's. Breton's more theoretical writings after the first Manifeste rarely add new categories to the provisional classification of surrealist images compiled in 1924, but rather create or reveal the climate in which his poems germinate and grow. Yet a useful appreciation of the imagery in the poems is often obtained when they are read in conjunction with Breton's contemporary prose-writings. Furthermore, discussions of imagery in most previous studies of Breton have rarely pointed out variations and developments. Alain Jouffroy, however, has suggested that Breton's style and pre-occupations are far less constant than those of Eluard:

"..... Ça miroite toujours beaucoup, Eluard, mais ce sont toujours les mêmes reflets. Alors, évidemment, comme l'eau augmente, que le fleuve s'élargit, que la vie se ralentit et qu'il faut quand même vivre, eh bien! la poésie d'Eluard perd de sa force, de son pouvoir révolutionnaire sur l'esprit du lecteur. Chez Breton, c'est absolument le contraire, vous assistez à une concentration progressive de la pensée poétique. Pendant les premiers exercices d'écriture automatique, Breton a laissé couler l'énergie mentale dont je parlais tout à l'heure, cette énergie qui nous traverse et que le poète se proposait de capter. Sa fluidité est grande jusqu'à L'Air de l'eau. Puis, il a exercé sur cette énergie même un contrôle de plus en plus dur jusqu'à composer les poèmes extrêmement élaborés et mystérieux de Constellations, les derniers qu'il ait fait paraître." 1

An examination of the theoretical background is an indispensable preliminary to a study of Breton's poetry, but it cannot by itself give a valid indication of the real importance, the real nature and function of Breton's images. Consequently, a basic objective of the present study is to search for Breton's secret and to examine the images in their context in Breton's writings. Pride of place must be given to an examination of Breton's poetry; and if the opening part, devoted to Breton's theoretical writings, is at times almost a piece of demolition, the remaining parts on the creative writings, on the poetry, are intended to be the more positive sides of this thesis. One has to remember, however, that in Breton's case the distinction between theory and practice is anything but rigid, as Julien Gracq has observed:

"Poète et théoricien, André Breton est toujours l'un et l'autre à la fois, et c'est ce qui donne à ses principaux ouvrages un caractère si embarrassant pour les classificateurs littéraires: on surprend à chaque instant chez lui la naissance de la pensée théorique au sein d'une image qui tend à s'élucider, de l'image au sein d'une pensée qui insensiblement se fait sommation poétique concrète." 2

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1. Surréalisme et Poésie; in Alquié, F. (ed.), Entretiens sur le surréalisme, Paris and La Haye: Mouton, 1968, p.136.
  2. André Breton, Quelques aspects de l'écrivain, 1970 edition, p.73.

Though Anna Balakian, in André Breton, Magus of Surrealism, may have opted to extract from his writings references to stock hermetic themes and motifs, she may unwittingly have diverted attention from the more subtle verbal alchemy at the heart of Breton's poetry. The image for Breton becomes the philosopher's stone which makes Rimbaud's dream of the Alchemy of the Verb approach reality.

The study of the imagery of a Surrealist poet becomes a study of new relationships, woven into intricate tapestries of fleeting images, which might be seen to reflect the complexity of life in a modern urban environment, where little is stable and where natural points of reference hardly apply. Yet, paradoxically, thanks largely to his imagery Breton becomes a new kind of nature poet, not just in the sense in which the Symbolists were nature poets, exploiting analogies between the outer and the inner worlds, but rather his universe expands considerably the normal conception of "nature", reconciling it with the human and the man-made, fusing the real and the imaginary, the actual and the possible. This is one of the areas this study sets out to explore, one of the ways in which it seeks to bring out aspects of Breton's poetry which have not yet been interpreted or discussed in sufficient detail.

In the first part, on Breton's poetic theory, the attention is focused on the gradual shift from the almost passive simple reception of images to the more active search for, and perception of, analogies; and this, together with the basic concentration on the image, helps to form the bridge between the study of the poetic theory and that of the poetry. In fact, the twin cornerstones of Breton's poetics, his almost blind faith in the image and his belief in the analogical process, are, if not inevitably, at least not surprisingly, basic aspects of his poetry.



PART ONE

THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

## SECTION ONE

### THE FORMULATION OF BRETON'S BASIC IDEAS ON IMAGERY

#### INTRODUCTION

Though the real starting point for a study of the image in the poetry of André Breton must still be his famous comments on the image near the end of the Manifeste du Surréalisme (1924), for it is there that one finds the essence of his theories, in the opening two chapters we hope to set these comments in their general context, if only to point out the problems facing Breton at the time and to be in a position to assess the contribution they make to the solution of these problems. He was by no means the only poet of his day to recognize the need to change our conceptions of imagery and to attempt to formulate a new definition of the image. In these two chapters we shall discuss firstly the important influences on Breton's basic theory of the image, as it is revealed in the Manifeste, and secondly similar attempts by contemporaneous Anglo-Saxon writers and critics in this domain.

The third chapter will be devoted to the Manifeste, and the emphasis there will be placed on the significance of Breton's list of "surrealist images".

Then, to complete the examination of Breton's initial theory of the image, two further texts, written at roughly the same time, Les mots sans rides<sup>1</sup> and the Introduction au discours sur le peu de réalité,<sup>2</sup> will be considered in chapter IV.

1. Littérature, 7 (Déc. 1922), pp.12-14; and then in Les Pas perdus, Paris: Gallimard, 1924, pp.167-171.
2. Commerce, 3 (hiver 1924), pp.25-57; reprinted in Point du Jour, Paris: Gallimard (Coll. 'Idées'), 1970, pp.7-29.

## CHAPTER ONE

### INFLUENCES ON BRETON'S THEORY OF THE IMAGE

On a number of occasions Breton has suggested that he had been influenced at the beginning of his career by the examples provided by men such as Mallarmé, Rimbaud, Apollinaire, Jarry, Vaché, Lautréamont, Saint-Pol-Roux and Reverdy. In this chapter we shall discuss the nature of the influence of each of these figures in turn, and in each case it will be related specifically to Breton's image-theories.

#### (a) Mallarmé.

Breton has freely admitted that, when he first started writing poetry it was Mallarmé who was his favourite poet; when, in Les Pas perdus, Breton is talking about his meeting with Jacques Vaché in Nantes at the beginning of 1916, he remarks:

"A cette époque, je composais des poèmes mallarméens." (PP 17)

It was under Mallarmé that Breton served the first stage of his apprenticeship as a poet. The nature and extent of the influence of Mallarmé's style will be seen when Breton's first poems, some "inédits" and Mont de Piété,<sup>1</sup> are examined in the opening chapter of Part III. At no stage, however, does Breton relate his conception of the arbitrary image to any theories of Mallarmé, though, as we shall see, the category, the image in which one of the terms is curiously hidden, had certainly been employed by Mallarmé.

#### (b) Rimbaud.

A similar situation exists, as far as the influence of Rimbaud is concerned. Breton was convinced that he wrote the final cycle of poems in Mont de Piété using the same technique as the one employed

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1. Paris: Au Sans Pareil, 1919.



by Rimbaud. In Breton's account of this in the Manifeste du Surréalisme one finds the telling remark:

"Je m'étais figuré que Rimbaud ne procédait pas autrement." (M 29)

In his early essay Les mots sans rides Breton gives Rimbaud the credit for making men more clearly aware of new properties present in words:

"C'est en assignant une couleur aux voyelles que pour la première fois, de façon consciente et en acceptant d'en supporter les conséquences, on détourna le mot de son devoir de signifier. Il naquit ce jour-là à une existence concrète, comme on ne lui en avait pas encore supposée." (PP 168)

Although Breton may have had misgivings about the phenomenon of colour-hearing and although the whole question of correspondences and synaesthesia goes back well before Rimbaud, it would appear from Breton's remarks that his reading of the sonnet Voyelles first caused him to investigate the nature of words and to suspect that this would be an important step in his quest for a new lyricism in poetry.

Furthermore, we know that at the period when Breton composed the poems of Mont de Piété Rimbaud's last poem, Rêve, was the one which obsessed him. Its precise importance for Breton is revealed in Situation surréaliste de l'objet, where he describes it as a

".... triomphe absolu du délire panthéistique, où le merveilleux épouse sans obstacle le trivial et qui demeure comme la quintessence des scènes les plus mystérieuses des drames de l'époque élisabéthaine et du second Faust!" (M 279-280)

Breton claims that after Rêve

".... l'interdépendance des parties du discours poétique n'a pas cessé de son côté d'être attaquée et minée de toutes manières."  
(M 279)

However important such a statement may be, it is not related explicitly by Breton to his theory of the image. Though Rimbaud's influence on Breton may have been considerable, and though it will

be seen that it can be detected in the poems of Mont de Piété, it does not overtly determine the views on the image expressed in the Manifeste. It is rather at the level of their basic approach to poetry, of their conception of the evocatory power of words, that the two men are so alike. Evidence of this is supplied by some of Enid Starkie's concluding remarks about Rimbaud, which could, virtually without exception, be applied to Breton:

"Rimbaud increased the evocative power of poetry, independently of the sense it conveyed; words with him are no longer to bear their dictionary meaning; they are no longer to express a logical content or to describe; they are a form of magic charm, they are intended to evoke a state of mind and soul. The essence of poetry does not consist in the words, or in the images — however beautiful these might be; poetry is the very sensation itself, and this sensation is to be allowed to find its own best expression, just as the lava stream burns out its own bed." <sup>1</sup>

The influence of Rimbaud on Breton transcends the question of the image, but, of course, has an enormous bearing on it.

(c) Apollinaire.

Though it will be seen that Reverdy related the question of the image to that of lyricism, Apollinaire, too, in the last decade or so of his life, constantly stressed the need for a new lyricism in poetry, and Apollinaire probably came closer than Reverdy to achieving it. Breton felt that the poetry of the future would be written in the new language prophesied and demanded by Apollinaire in La Victoire:

"O bouches l'homme est à la recherche d'un nouveau langage  
 Auquel le grammairien d'aucune langue n'aura rien à dire  
 .....  
 On veut de nouveaux sons de nouveaux sons de nouveaux sons." <sup>2</sup>

This particular poem was cited by Breton in Les mots sans rides. Of the many references made by Apollinaire to his quest for a new kind

1. Starkie, E., Arthur Rimbaud, London: Hamish Hamilton, 1947, pp.419-420.
2. Apollinaire, G., Calligrammes, Paris: Gallimard (Coll. 'Poésie'), 1966, p.180.

of lyricism in poetry, the following, from a letter dated May 11th, 1908, to Toussaint Luca, is typical:

"Vois le Gil Blas du 4 mai, lundi, tu y verras mes derniers vers. Ils sont parents de l'Onirocritique et de l'article sur Royère. Je ne cherche qu'un lyrisme neuf et humaniste en même temps." <sup>1</sup>

Breton admired the way Apollinaire pressed on towards a goal the two men shared: the need to "reinvent" poetry:

"A partir de Lundi rue Christine, on a eu beau critiquer les formules d'aboutition successives de ces recherches, on n'a pas détourné Guillaume Apollinaire de son but: la réinvention de la poésie." (PP 37-38)

For this to be possible Breton implies that the poet should possess a special faculty, a gift Apollinaire possessed in abundance, and a gift possessed by all the Surrealist poets, without exception, "un don prodigieux d'émerveillement". (PP 28) This ability to stop and look and marvel at everything -- words, everyday sights in the streets, Gothic architecture, figurines from South Sea isles, a beautiful woman -- is the almost intangible legacy Apollinaire handed down to the Surrealists, to Breton in particular. It is possible, however, to pinpoint more precise heirlooms, more obviously connected with the question of the image, bequeathed by Apollinaire to Breton. First and foremost is the quality of surprise. For Apollinaire, of course, surprise was the hallmark of modernity in art and poetry; and to illustrate this basic aspect of Apollinaire's philosophy, Breton quotes a remark inspired by the work of Chirico:

"..... pour dépeindre le caractère fatal des choses modernes, la surprise est le ressort le plus moderne auquel on puisse avoir recours." (PP 41)

Breton could appreciate that Apollinaire practised what he preached, for he felt that Le Poète assassiné is "comme la défense et l'illustra-

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1. v. Adéma, P.M., Guillaume Apollinaire, Paris: Ed. de la Table Ronde, 1968, p.136.



tion de ce principe." (PP 41) Breton could have quoted a number of similar claims made by Apollinaire about the importance of the element of surprise, including the ones which are perhaps the most famous of all:

"..... Il (le nouveau) est tout dans la surprise. L'esprit nouveau est également dans la surprise. C'est ce qu'il y a en lui de plus vivant, de plus neuf. La surprise est le grand ressort nouveau." <sup>1</sup>

The idea of surprise plays an important part in helping Breton determine his conception of the image, in the way it drives him to a more extreme position than that of Reverdy.

Not without some relevance to the present study is an assessment of Apollinaire made by Aragon in a magazine article in 1920, for Aragon saw the importance the image had for the older poet:

"Jusqu'à lui (Apollinaire), personne peut-être n'avait tant aimé les images..... Le langage poétique d'un siècle pesait sur la vie contemporaine. Les métaphores romantiques, tombées dans le domaine public, trouvaient après elles un ennui languissant sur le monde.....

Au milieu de la dépréciation des miracles, Guillaume Apollinaire inaugure par la réhabilitation des tropes, l'ère d'une sensualité nouvelle....." <sup>2</sup>

Given the closeness of Aragon's friendship with Breton at that time, it is most unlikely that he would not have made the same kind of remark to Breton, or indeed that Breton would not have read Aragon's article; it is also unlikely that the young poets would not have seen the connection between Apollinaire's use of imagery and the "nouveau lyrisme" his poetry possessed. Indeed, as early as 1909 Jules Romains had commented on the importance in Apollinaire's poems

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1. Apollinaire, G., L'Esprit nouveau et les poètes; in Oeuvres complètes, (ed. Décaudin, M.), Paris: André Balland et Jacques Lecat, 1966, p.906.
  2. Aragon, L., Calligrammes, article in L'Esprit nouveau, No.1 (1920): quoted in Garaudy, R., L'itinéraire d'Aragon, Paris: Callimard, 1961, p.69.

of images bringing together "distant realities" and revealing surprising analogies:

"Dans les vers de Guillaume Apollinaire, une simplicité, qui est une extrême élégance, admet l'apparition, l'explosion d'analogies imprévues, et qui juxtaposent si soudainement des parcelles de l'univers si distantes qu'il faut bien voir là une collaboration de l'intelligence, de l'esprit - l'esprit de finesse -, aux aspirations de la sensibilité. Certains de ses poèmes ont une surface à mille reflets, semée de papillotements, et d'où s'élève une poussière lumineuse qui est l'égrisée du savoir." <sup>1</sup>

One can assume that Apollinaire read this appreciation, and even if Breton may not have seen it in 1909 - when he was but thirteen -, it is possible that Apollinaire may have mentioned it to Breton in the course of their conversations. <sup>2</sup>

One must not forget, too, that it was from Apollinaire that Breton takes the word "surréaliste". Philippe Soupault is very precise when he gives the reason for choosing the term: he claims it was selected because of one particular text by Apollinaire, Oniro-critique. <sup>3</sup>

(d) Jarry.

The third chapter of Les Pas perdus is devoted to Jarry. Although Breton is concerned there with giving a brief survey of the life and works of Jarry, this does not prevent him from mentioning, if only in passing, two points which affect Breton's elaboration of the basic doctrines of Surrealism.

There is first of all the example of Jarry's life. Breton sees that the line of demarcation one customarily finds between a

1. v. Adéma, P.M., Guillaume Apollinaire, Paris: Ed. de la Table Ronde, 1968, p.159.
2. Breton claimed that he saw Apollinaire almost every day from May 10th, 1916, the day after Apollinaire's trepanning operation, until the latter's death. (E 23).
3. Souvenirs, in André Breton et le mouvement surréaliste, Paris: NRF, 1er avril 1967, pp.665-666.

man and his writings had ceased to exist as far as Jarry was concerned: Jarry and Ubu became indistinguishable. The consequence is that Breton comes to decide that a poet's way of life will, to a degree, be part of his poetry. For Breton Jarry, like Vaché, is a poet as much by his behaviour as by what he writes.

Of more obvious relevance to a study of surrealist imagery is the second aspect of Jarry's influence, his "humour", for two types of surrealist images in Breton's list, "(celle qui) tire d'elle-même une justification formelle dérisoire" and "(celle qui) déchaîne le rire", are primarily humorous images. Of the two the latter is closer to the brand of "humour noir" found in Jarry and destined to become a vital feature of Surrealism. In the article in Les Pas perdus Breton recounts a number of anecdotes which serve to illustrate this side of Jarry's personality. There is one really choice example:

"Un jour, dans un jardin de Corbeil, Jarry s'amuse à déboucher le champagne à coups de revolver. Par delà la clôture, la propriétaire de la villa veille sur ses enfants. Des balles s'égarant chez elle, provincialement vêtue elle accourt, s'introduit avec cérémonie. Elle fait observer à la maîtresse de maison qu'elle n'a pas loué un champ de tir et ajoute, très digne, que ses enfants pouvaient être victimes du jeu. 'Eh! intervient Jarry, qu'à cela ne tienne, madame, nous vous en ferons d'autres'."  
(PP 58)

Though it would involve a considerable extension of the meaning of the term "image" to include such an anecdote in a list of images, this kind of humour is found frequently in automatic texts, and the example with which Breton in the Manifeste illustrates the "image which raises a laugh" is, in its form, not far removed from this story of Jarry.

As for the specific question of imagery, however, one can hardly claim that Jarry's influence on Breton is very significant.



(e) Vaché.

The influence of Jacques Vaché on Breton is very similar to that of Jarry, but more personal. Breton devoted chapter IV of Les Pas perdus to the young man he had met in 1916 in Nantes at the "centre de neurologie" in the Rue du Bocage. Breton has admitted that this was one of the most difficult periods of his life; but soon Vaché gave him a new outlook. In the same way that Breton later was able to captivate people, Vaché in 1916 fascinated Breton.

Breton had claimed in the opening chapter of Les Pas perdus:

"En littérature, je me suis successivement épris de Rimbaud, de Jarry, d'Apollinaire, de Nouveau, de Lautréamont, mais c'est à Jacques Vaché que je dois le plus." (PP 9)

In such company the name of Jacques Vaché seems somewhat out of place, of course. Vaché wrote nothing except a few letters, addressed to Breton, Aragon and Théodore Fraenckel, which were later published under the title of Lettres de Guerre. One must therefore look elsewhere for an explanation of the importance Breton attached to him. Once again Breton was intrigued by a man's behaviour, which he could regard as a kind of poetry in its own right. Vaché's death, too, ran true to form:

"Sa mort eut ceci d'admirable qu'elle peut passer pour accidentelle. Il absorba, je crois, quarante grammes d'opium, bien que, comme on pense, il ne fût pas un fumeur expérimenté. En revanche, il est fort possible que ses malheureux compagnons ignoraient l'usage de la drogue et qu'il voulut en disparaissant commettre à leur dépens, une dernière fourberie drôle." (PP 23-24)

Vaché, in his life and in his death, was "l'humour" incarnate, and, indeed, one of the most important remarks he made was his definition of the word, which Breton and Eluard were to use in their Dictionnaire abrégé du surréalisme (1938):

"Je crois que c'est une sensation - j'allais dire un sens - aussi - de l'inutilité théâtrale (et sans joie) de tout." <sup>1</sup>

Breton felt that Vaché's UMOUR (sic) was one of the most important sources of modern poetry; it was not a written form of humour, but one which manifested itself in the normal run of conversation.

Vaché could be extremely sarcastic: he called Breton "le poète" (sic); he derided literature; he sneered at poetry, especially the "traditional" poetry of a Mallarmé or a Valéry. It is doubtless due in no small part to Vaché that Breton turned away from that particular conception of poetry, and it is in this light that one can appreciate the sense of Breton's self-deflating remark about the effect Vaché had on his development:

"Sans lui, j'aurais peut-être été un poète." (PP 9)

The indications are that Breton would have turned away from Valéry, come what may. There are few indications that he would have turned away from Rimbaud, if it had not been for Vaché, who regarded Rimbaud as "un personnage puéril et navrant"; this alone is perhaps sufficient reason why Breton did not set up a Rimbaud cult rather than a Lautréamont cult among the Surrealists.

Virtually every single idea of Vaché's about literature and the arts in general was negative, but Breton found this attitude attractive and was quite sincere in his admiration for Vaché's revolt. Breton even goes as far as to say that:

"La fortune de Jacques Vaché est de n'avoir rien produit. Toujours il repoussa du pied l'oeuvre d'art, ce boulet qui retient l'âme après la mort." (PP 88)

Breton, fortunately, was able to pass beyond the negative attitude of Vaché, just as he passed beyond the purely destructive aspect of Dada.

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1. In Eluard, P., Oeuvres complètes, Paris: Gallimard (Coll. 'Pléiade'), t. 1. 1968, p.749.

Although Vaché may have approved of the criterion of arbitrariness, of gratuitousness, which dominates Breton's conception of the image, there is no real evidence that Vaché helped Breton to work out his theory of the image, apart from the fact that Vaché's *UMOIR* is obviously related to the Surrealists' principle of "l'humour noir" and may inspire the presence of categories of humorous images in Breton's classification of types of surrealist images.

(f) Lautréamont.

The importance of Lautréamont, as far as surrealist imagery is concerned, is altogether different. Chapter VI of Les Pas perdus is entitled Les Chants de Maldoror, but this short article, only five pages long, does not really try to get to grips with Lautréamont's ideas. It contains, however, one or two significant observations. A couple of sentences reveal Breton's conviction that the image was playing an ever-increasing role, even in those fields where the extension of its use would not have been predictable:

"Je crois que la littérature tend à devenir pour les modernes une machine puissante qui remplace avantageusement les anciennes manières de penser. En désespoir de cause, et contre toute loyauté, les meilleurs logiciens essaient d'obtenir notre assentiment au moyen d'une image." (PP 81)

Breton then slightly misquotes Lautréamont to support this claim:

"..... la métaphore rend beaucoup plus de services aux aspirations humaines vers l'infini que ne s'efforcent de se le figurer ceux qui sont imbus de préjugés." (*ibid.*)

Breton then touches on two questions which had already been pre-occupying him, but which he now sees as being clearly interrelated: the question of surprise and the appeal of the juxtaposition or fusion of opposites:

"Deux corps combinés, en chimie, peuvent dégager une chaleur telle, donner lieu à un précipité si franc que l'expérience ne m'intéresse plus. De telles préparations sont encore celles qui procurent le véritable repos des sens. Il est étrange qu'on reproche aux poètes



de faire appel à la surprise, comme si nous ne souhaitons pas toujours qu'on tire un coup de revolver à notre oreille afin de nous éviter quelques secondes de faire attention." (PP 82)

At this point Breton comes very close to one of the ideas of the Manifeste du Surréalisme, where, going one step further than Reverdy, he demands of the image created by the chance juxtaposition of opposites the production of a spark; and, significantly and characteristically, Breton is more interested in the dynamic generation of the heat, the flame, and the formation of the precipitate than in the rest of the experiment and its enduring results.

The essay as a whole, however, is curiously guarded; it gives little idea of the impact Lautréamont had on Breton and his friends of that period; but when Breton recalls in the Entretiens the discovery of Lautréamont, he gives a far better impression of the enthusiasm the author of Les Chants de Maldoror inspired:

"Bon nombre de nos objections nous étaient, d'ailleurs, suggérées par la découverte récente de Lautréamont, qui nous avait tous transportés. Rien, pas même Rimbaud, ne m'avait agité à ce point ... Aujourd'hui encore, je suis absolument incapable de considérer de sang-froid ce message fulgurant qui me paraît excéder de toutes parts les possibilités humaines. Pour savoir jusqu'où pouvait aller notre exaltation à son propos, il n'est que de se rappeler ces lignes de Soupault: 'Ce n'est pas à moi, ni à personne (entendez-vous, Messieurs, qui veut mes témoins?) de juger M. le Comte. On ne juge pas M. de Lautréamont. On le reconnaît au passage et on salue jusqu'à terre. Je donne ma vie à celui ou à celle qui me le fera oublier à jamais!' Cette déclaration en forme de pacte, sans hésitation, je l'aurais contresignée." (E 42)

As far as Breton can remember, he read Lautréamont for the first time towards the end of 1918. Lautréamont was almost completely unknown then, though he had been admired by Jarry.<sup>1</sup>

It does seem fairly clear that certain features of the attitude and work of Lautréamont helped to determine or confirm Breton's

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1. In the tract Situation surréaliste de l'objet Breton was to describe Jarry as the "premier poète aussi tout pénétré de l'enseignement de Lautréamont". (M 281)

ideas at the moment when he was formulating the basic doctrines of Surrealism.

Breton could not fail to be attracted by the "humour" of Lautréamont, the "humour" which dominates the latter's works. Breton has often claimed that there lies his originality. When Breton compiles his Anthologie de l'humour noir shortly before the outbreak of the Second World War, he stressed this point once more at the beginning of the final paragraph of his article on Lautréamont:

"Le contraste flagrant qu'offrent, au point de vue moral, ces deux ouvrages (Les Chants de Maldoror et Poésies) se passe de toute autre explication. Mais, que l'on cherche au-delà ce qui peut constituer leur unité, leur identité au point de vue psychologique, et l'on découvrira que celle-ci repose avant tout sur l'humour." (HN 230)

With Lautréamont the question of "l'humour" is almost inextricably related to the questions of language and revolt. Indeed, it is the form of Lautréamont's language which helps to create the "humour". Lautréamont attacks the very basis of language. Without infringing the normal rules of syntax, Lautréamont poses a more fundamental problem: his tone is such that it is often impossible to determine whether he is being perfectly serious or whether he is making game of the reader. The particular tone of the author constitutes an insidious attack on reason and logic.

Breton latches on to Lautréamont's remark about the "développement extrêmement rapide" of his sentences and points out the obvious connection between this and the processes used by the Surrealists. (He is thinking especially of automatic writing.):

"On sait que de la systématisation de ce moyen d'expression part le surréalisme." (HN 230)

Breton is fascinated, too, by other devices tried by Lautréamont, including the "correction" or "développement" of maxims,

particularly those of Vauvenargues: for example, Vauvenargues' maxim, "Le désespoir est la plus grande de nos erreurs", is transformed by Ducasse in the Poésies into "Le désespoir est la plus petite de nos erreurs".<sup>1</sup> Aragon has given a plausible serious explanation of this apparently childish ploy:

"Tourner au bien ce qu'a été écrit au mal, voilà l'intention que se prête Isidore Ducasse dans une lettre concernant les Poésies."<sup>2</sup>

This appears to be the inspiration for Breton and Eluard when they wrote in 1936 Notes sur la poésie,<sup>3</sup> where they adopt the same method, but take as their starting-point some of Valéry's observations.

Perhaps the most important aspect of the language and style of Lautréamont, as far as the Surrealists are concerned, however, is his imagery; and certainly this is the aspect which is the most important for the present study. The Surrealists' debt to Lautréamont in this respect has been acknowledged by Eluard among others:

"C'est entre 1866 et 1875 que les poètes entreprirent de réunir systématiquement ce qui semblait à tout jamais séparé. Lautréamont le fit plus délibérément qu'aucun autre."<sup>4</sup>

One finds in this remark the notion of the bringing together of "distant realities", which will inspire not only Reverdy and Breton but also the Imagists in England.

By means of his rather bizarre images Lautréamont can be seen to have extended considerably the possibilities of language itself and, furthermore, to have helped to create a new and modern conception of beauty. The famous "beau comme" images of Les Chants de Maldoror, one of which Breton will cite as an example in the Manifeste, become

1. Lautréamont, Oeuvres complètes, Paris: Corti, 1961, p.392.
2. Contribution à l'avortement des études maldororiennes, in Le Sur-réalisme au service de la révolution, Oct. 1930, p.22.
3. Paris: G.L.M.
4. Eluard, P., Donner à Voir, Paris: Gallimard, 1939, p.129.



one of the cornerstones of Surrealist aesthetics. They have clearly left their mark on the painting of Dali, but they have also exercised a considerable influence on the poetics of Breton. Their importance in this latter respect is well illustrated by Breton, himself, in the Entretiens, where he tries to explain to André Parinaud the problems with which the future Surrealists were grappling in the last months of the First World War:

"..... les préoccupations sont celles qui tendent à l'élucidation du phénomène lyrique en poésie, j'entends à ce moment, par lyrisme, ce qui constitue un dépassement en quelque sorte spasmodique de l'expression contrôlée. Je me persuade que ce dépassement, pour être obtenu, ne peut résulter que d'un afflux émotionnel considérable et qu'il est aussi le seul générateur d'émotion profonde en retour mais - et c'est là le mystère - l'émotion induite différera du tout au tout de l'émotion inductrice. Il y aura eu transmutation. Les plus hauts exemples que j'en donne tiennent chez Lautréamont dans l'exubérance des 'Beau comme', dont l'exemple le plus souvent cité est celui-ci: 'Beau comme la rencontre fortuite, sur une table de dissection, d'une machine à coudre et d'un parapluie' ou encore dans les défaillances de mémoire qui, à la fin du Chant IV de Maldoror, entourent l'évocation de 'La Chevelure de Falmer'. Chez Rimbaud, il me semble que les cîmes sont atteintes dans 'Dévotion' et dans 'Rêve'." (E 43)

Therefore, at a time when he was trying to evolve a modern form of lyricism, Breton appreciated Les Chants de Maldoror precisely for their lyrical qualities. Breton was convinced that the lyricism he sought could only be the result of this "dépassement en quelque sorte spasmodique de l'expression contrôlée". Breton was keenly aware that this kind of "dépassement" is a very rare phenomenon in poetry, but thenceforth he concentrated his enquiries on that particular area: the interest he took in automatic writing, hypnotic sleep, dreams, various forms of insanity, stemmed from the initial preoccupation with the problem of lyricism. Although Apollinaire and Reverdy in their theories were instrumental in making Breton see the need for a new and modern kind of lyricism, it was in Les Chants de Maldoror that Breton found what he considered to be the best examples of it.

Although these three names, Apollinaire, Reverdy and Lautréamont, are perhaps the ones most frequently mentioned in connection with the formulation of Breton's theory of the image, and although Breton discusses in Les Pas perdus Apollinaire, Jarry, Vaché and Lautréamont, one other poet, Saint-Pol-Roux, influenced Breton's thinking on the nature and the importance of imagery at the time the Manifeste du surréalisme was being thought out and drafted.

(g) Saint-Pol-Roux.

In the summer of 1923, while Breton was in Brittany, he wrote to Saint-Pol-Roux and visited him in his manor-house at Camaret. Breton wanted to try to repair in some way what he considered to be "la fatalité qui pesait sur lui et la lâcheté de ses amis."<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, the subsequent banquet organised in honour of Saint-Pol-Roux at the Closerie des Lilas ended disastrously in uproar. Of more relevance to the present study, however, is Breton's written tribute to Saint-Pol-Roux, the article Le Maître de l'image.<sup>2</sup>

Breton praised Saint-Pol-Roux first of all in general terms, for the purity of his moral stand, before coming to the main points of the article, the poet's imagery, as its title indicates:

"Non content d'affirmer à nouveau le droit de se contredire, il semble qu'il tienne pour rien cette contradiction et, d'une conscience quasi divine de son rôle, qu'il dégage une certitude capitale, à savoir que rien ne peut le mettre en conflit avec lui-même. 'Toutes les opinions éparses m'habitent tour à tour.' N'est-ce pas cette gratuité, à laquelle il est si difficile de parvenir, qui nous livre le plus sûrement la beauté? Depuis un demi-siècle, sans contredit, toute l'évolution poétique en fait foi.

Il paraît de plus en plus que l'élément générateur par

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1. In Briant, T., Saint-Pol-Roux, Paris: Seghers (Coll. 'Poètes d'aujourd'hui'), 1961, p.53.
  2. Published in Les Nouvelles Littéraires, May 29, 1925; reprinted in Eigeldinger, M. (ed.), André Breton, Essais et Témoignages, 1950 edition, pp.25-29; 1970 edition, pp.27-31.

excellence de ce monde qu'à la place de l'ancien nous entendons faire nôtre, n'est autre chose que ce que les poètes appellent l'image. La vanité des idées ne saurait échapper à l'examen, même rapide. Les modes d'expression littéraires les mieux choisis, toujours plus ou moins conventionnels, imposent à l'esprit une discipline à laquelle je suis convaincu qu'il se prête mal. Seule l'image, en ce qu'elle a d'imprévu et de soudain, me donne la mesure de la libération possible et cette libération est si complète qu'elle m'effraie. C'est par la force des images que, par la suite des temps, pourraient bien s'accomplir les vraies révolutions. En certaines images il y a déjà l'amorce d'un tremblement de terre. C'est là un singulier pouvoir que détient l'homme et qu'il peut s'il le veut, à une échelle de plus en plus grande, faire subir.

La vertu et la volonté de toute-puissance des images, il pourrait bien s'agir là d'un phénomène nouveau, caractéristique. Il y a quelque témérité à le prétendre et si j'ajoute que pour l'avoir pressenti, le rôle futur de Saint-Pol-Roux me paraît grand entre les grands - Saint-Pol-Roux, le maître de l'image - chacun se retirera en paix. Mais moi qui sais de quel désintéressement prodigieux ceci est la somme (l'image ne trompe pas), j'affirme que là même où vous dites n'être sensible qu'à l'ingéniosité, que là où vous vous avouez vaincu par la grâce, vous ne voyez que du feu." <sup>1</sup>

Although this text written in 1925 appears in places to be more an expression of Breton's ideas on the image than of those of Saint-Pol-Roux, one must, nevertheless, bear in mind that Breton did show great enthusiasm for the older poet in 1923 and that he does single out for special mention the importance of contradiction and the quality of gratuitousness in Saint-Pol-Roux' writings. When one recalls that the image of apparent contradiction is the first category in Breton's list of surrealist images in the Manifeste and that Breton treats the words "arbitraire" and "gratuit" virtually as synonyms, it is difficult to refute the suggestion that Saint-Pol-Roux, too, had some effect on Breton's theory of the image as expressed in the Manifeste, where he recounts an interesting little anecdote about Saint-Pol-Roux:

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1. In Eigeldinger, M. (ed.), André Breton, Essais et Témoignages, 1970, pp.29-30.



"On raconte que chaque jour, au moment de s'endormir, Saint-Pol-Roux faisait naguère placer, sur la porte de son manoir de Camaret, un écriteau sur lequel on pouvait lire: LE POÈTE TRAVAILLE." (M 25)

Théophile Briant points out a further connection between Saint-Pol-Roux and Breton:

"A l'idéoréalisme de Saint-Pol-Roux correspondait le surréalisme d'André Breton, qui n'était qu'un mot nouveau pour exprimer la même idée 'révolutionnaire', - c'est-à-dire le pouvoir libérateur de l'Image, qui dépasse et transfigure ce que le commun des mortels nomme 'réalité'." <sup>1</sup>

This is, however, an over-simplification, for despite Saint-Pol-Roux' exhortations, "concrétiser l'abstrait", "objectiver l'Absolu", "Plasticiser l'Idée", <sup>2</sup> despite his belief in the imagination and despite his images, his concept of "idéoréalisme" was never developed and presented to the public as Surrealism was; and in any case there is more to the latter than the "pouvoir libérateur de l'image". There is possibly a greater affinity between the methods and beliefs of the two poets when it comes to writing about analogy. When we discuss this aspect of Breton's poetry, we should bear in mind certain of the observations of Saint-Pol-Roux, for example his claim in the Liminaire des Reposoirs de la Procession (1893) that the poet "dématérialise le sensible pour pénétrer l'intelligible et percevoir l'idée", <sup>3</sup> or words from the same text quoted by Breton in Le Maître de l'image:

"Le monde des choses, hormis telles concessions générales de primitivité, me semble l'enseigne inadéquate du monde des idées; l'homme me paraît n'habiter qu'une féerie d'indices vagues, de légers prétextes, de provocations timides, d'affinités lointaines, d'énigmes." <sup>4</sup>

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1. Briant, T., Saint-Pol-Roux, p.66.

2. Saint-Pol-Roux, Cinéma vivant, Paris: Rougerie, 1972, pp.24, 92.

3. Quoted by Briant, T., op.cit., p.70.

4. André Breton, Essais et Témoignages, p.28.

In such remarks Saint-Pol-Roux is, of course, expressing one of the basic beliefs of the Symbolist movement; and the fact that Breton is prepared to quote them is a further indication that the links between Symbolism and Surrealism are not as tenuous as one might have thought.

(h) Reverdy.

The influence of Reverdy is particularly significant, for the discussion of the image in the Manifeste is, in fact, centred around Reverdy's theory of the image.

The essence of Reverdy's ideas on the image is contained in the following extracts, of which Breton in the Manifeste quotes the first two paragraphs, from Le gant de crin, which gathers together a number of pronouncements made by Reverdy in his review Nord-Sud at the end of the First World War:

"L'image est une création pure de l'esprit. Elle ne peut naître d'une comparaison, mais du rapprochement de deux réalités plus ou moins éloignées.

Plus les rapports des deux réalités rapprochées seront lointains et justes, plus l'image sera forte, plus elle aura de puissance émotive et de réalité poétique.....

Le propre de l'image forte est d'être issue du rapprochement spontané de deux réalités très distantes dont l'esprit seul a saisi les rapports. Si les sens approuvent totalement l'image, ils la tuent dans l'esprit... Le lyrisme qui va vers l'inconnu, vers la profondeur, participe naturellement du mystère.

La part faite au mystère, la conscience qu'on en a prise, et le parti qu'ont décidé d'en tirer les poètes modernes, caractérisent notre époque.

Il naît de deux mots pour la première fois et avec justesse accouplés. Il jaillit d'une image inouïe, inattendue, vraie, capable de placer une production nouvelle de l'esprit dans la réalité. Il réside dans une phrase que le mystère de sa signification et la qualité des mots qui la composent suspendent au-dessus du cours normal de nos idées. Il apparaît chaque fois que l'auteur se fait une révélation au-dessus de lui-même." <sup>1</sup>

The first part of this quotation recalls the Bergsonian theory that

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1. Reverdy, P., Le gant de crin, Paris; Flammarion, 1968, pp.30, 32, 36.

"..... beaucoup d'images diverses, empruntées à des ordres de choses très différents, pourront, par la convergence de leur action, diriger la conscience sur le point précis où il y a une certaine intuition à saisir. En choisissant les images aussi disparates que possible, on empêchera l'une quelconque d'entre elles d'usurper la place de l'intuition qu'elle est chargée d'appeler puisqu'elle serait alors chassée tout de suite par ses rivales",<sup>1</sup>

an idea which E. Fiser sees as "tout le mécanisme de la suggestion par les symboles".<sup>2</sup>

Though Breton will come to question in the Manifeste whether Reverdy practised what he preached, whether the "rapprochement spontané" could be achieved voluntarily, wittingly, Reverdy was unquestionably one of the major influences on Breton at this particular period, both on a personal level and in the way he helped to bring about a decisive change in Breton's conception of poetry. In 1952 Breton talked about his discussions with Reverdy in the series of radio interviews with André Parinaud which were published as the first part of Entretiens. In company with Aragon and Soupault, Breton used to visit Reverdy, usually on Sundays, in his apartment in the Rue Cortot. Breton referred to the astonishing "climate" there and "cette magie verbale, qui, pour nous, était le domaine où Reverdy opérait". (E 41) Breton was convinced that only Aloysius Bertrand and Rimbaud had achieved as much in that field. Furthermore, Reverdy had, for Breton, the great merit of having wedded theory to practice:

"Reverdy était beaucoup plus théoricien qu'Apollinaire: il eût même été pour nous un maître idéal s'il avait été moins passionné dans la discussion, plus véritablement soucieux des arguments qu'on lui opposait, mais il est vrai que cette passion entraînait pour beaucoup dans son charme. Nul n'a mieux médité et su faire

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1. Bergson, H., La Pensée et le mouvant, Paris: Félix Alcan, 1934, pp.210-211.
  2. Fiser, E., Le Symbole littéraire, Paris: Corti, 1941, p.42.



méditer sur les moyens profonds de la poésie. Rien ne devait, par la suite, avoir plus d'importance que ses thèses sur l'image poétique...." (E 41-42)

Though Breton, Aragon and Soupault knew at the end of the First World War that Reverdy would not be able to understand and appreciate the ideas of a Vaché, for example, and though Breton attributes to a potential divergence of views on Lautréamont the fact that henceforth different paths were to be taken by Reverdy on the one hand and by the future Surrealists on the other (E 42), nonetheless, at least as far as the Manifeste is concerned, Breton's ideas on the image stem directly from those of Reverdy.

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Thus one can locate a number of obvious sources of certain aspects of Breton's theory of the surrealist image. A number of poets and critics from the middle of the nineteenth century onwards had suggested the idea of bringing together in a metaphor "distant realities", of producing a less motivated image; poets such as Apollinaire and Reverdy were beginning to perceive the connection between imagery and a new, modern form of lyricism; certain of the categories of surrealist images in Breton's list in the Manifeste were being hinted at by precursors of the Surrealist movement. Although the discussion of the image in the Manifeste du Surréalisme is centred around some of Reverdy's ideas, other important poets, Lautréamont, Saint-Pol-Roux, Apollinaire especially, contribute greatly to the formation of Breton's thought in this respect.

The evolution of a new conception of the image and a new awareness of its importance in poetry were not just French preoccupations at the beginning of this century, however; and in the next chapter the background to the formulation of Breton's basic theory

of the image will be considered very briefly from a different angle, that of similar investigations by Anglo-Saxon writers, particularly the Imagists, and their connection with Breton's views; and part of the purpose of such a comparison is to underline the fact that when Breton and the English poets were seeking to define satisfactorily their new conception of the image, they were attempting the near impossible.

## CHAPTER TWO

### THE IMAGISTS AND THE IMAGE.<sup>1</sup>

It is virtually a truism to observe that the concept, the "image", was at the centre of the preoccupations of the Imagist group of poets just before and during the First World War. As F.S. Flint pointed out in his short article, The History of Imagism:

"There was a lot of talk and practice among us, Storer leading it chiefly, of what we called the Image. We were very much influenced by Modern French Symbolist Poetry." <sup>2</sup>

Although the exact composition of the Imagist group has always given rise to debate, and in any case fluctuated to some extent, it is reasonably safe to claim that its chief spokesmen or theoreticians were T.E. Hulme and Ezra Pound; and in this chapter certain of the pronouncements of these two men, together with a few observations by other Imagists, will be discussed.

The acknowledged French influence immediately leads us to suspect that the Imagists, as they sought to evolve a new form of poetry and a new conception of the image, would have encountered similar problems to those facing Breton between 1919 and 1924.

The French influence was not confined to Symbolist poets, however; Bergson and Remy de Gourmont were also instrumental in the matter. T.E. Hulme attended a philosophical congress at Bologna at

1. We rely considerably on the standard studies of the Imagists, viz. Hughes, Glenn, Imagism and the Imagists: A Study in Modern Poetry, London: Bowes & Bowes, 1960. (First published in 1931 by Stanford University Press); Coffman, Stanley K., Jnr., Imagism: A Chapter for the History of Modern Poetry, Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1951; Jones, P. (ed.), Imagist Poetry, London: Penguin Books, 1972; plus studies of Hulme and Pound, listed in the bibliography. Moreover, because of the title and basic nature of this thesis, this chapter cannot be more than a very brief, not to say sketchy, study of the ways in which the poetic theories of the Imagists on the one hand and of Breton on the other have both points of resemblance and great differences. This is a subject we intend to examine more thoroughly at a later date.
2. The Egoist, London, May 1, 1915; quoted in Jones, op.cit., p.16.





which Bergson discussed "the image", and as Peter Jones remarks:

"..... Pound almost certainly attended Hulme's subsequent lectures on Bergson."<sup>1</sup>

Jones claims that Hulme derived from Bergson the distinction of "intellect" and "intuition" and stresses the importance of the following passage in Hulme's authorized translation of Bergson's

An Introduction to Metaphysics:

"Many diverse images, borrowed from very different orders of things, may, by the convergence of their action, direct consciousness to the precise point where there is a certain intuition to be seized."<sup>2</sup>

Here, of course, Bergson is employing the word "image" in the sense of a "reproduction mentale d'origine sensible", whereas Reverdy and Breton sought to bring together, within the poetic image, phenomena from very different orders of things, having perceived bonds or analogies between them.

Coffman feels that a passage from Hulme's "Lecture on Modern Poetry" is clearly an echo of Bergson on the poet's method:

"Say the poet is moved by a certain landscape, he selects from that certain images which, put into juxtaposition in separate lines, serve to suggest and evoke the state he feels."<sup>3</sup>

Though Reverdy and the Surrealists may juxtapose "distant realities", either just to create a new poetic image or to evoke some deeper perception or analogy, they normally equate the term "image" with "métaphore" rather than with the "reproduction mentale". The contrast between Surrealist and Imagist conceptions of "the image" at this level is brought out vividly in a confiding remark by Richard Aldington:

1. op.cit., p.17.

2. London: MacMillan & Co., Ltd., 1913, p.14; i.e. the idea mentioned with reference to Reverdy (*supra*, p.48).

3. Quoted in Imagism: A Chapter for the History of Modern Poetry, p.56.

"We wanted to write hard, clear patterns of words, interpreting moods by 'images', i.e. pictures, not similes." <sup>1</sup>

Still with reference to Bergson, Coffman makes a point of crucial importance, ending with an allusion to the state of receptivity, which becomes a fundamental aspect of Breton's poetics, to be seen at work in the various stages of his career:

"Finally Bergson had also solved the problem of communication in terms of the image or analogy. Faced with the difficulty of expressing the 'unique' and 'inexpressible', his philosophy relied heavily on striking analogies. He did not believe that images can express reality fully or even partially, but he was convinced that they provide the only means by which man can approach the point where he will be forced to surrender to it ..... The artist prepares the way for intuition by lulling the active and resistant powers of intellect and creating a state of mind receptive to suggestion." <sup>2</sup>

The basis of Hulme's poetics was, beyond question, the analogical method:

"Never, never, never a simple statement. It has no effect. Always must have analogies, which make an other-world through-the-glass effect, which is what I want." <sup>3</sup>

He argued that thought consists in "the simultaneous presentation to the mind of two different images", he sees it "as merely the discovery of new analogies, when useful and sincere, and not mere paradoxes", and as "the joining together of new analogies". <sup>4</sup> For Hulme poetry was neither an occult art nor an art capable of revealing the mysteries and truths of the universe; in Breton's later works particularly, however, there is the suggestion that the poet is at least hoping for a brief glimpse of the truth, some partial revelation. Though the aim for Hulme was the expression of life's "sudden lifts" and "moments of ecstasy", <sup>5</sup> for him they appeared to be nothing more

1. Letter (unpublished) to Amy Lowell, Nov. 10, 1917; quoted in Coffman, op.cit., p.168.
2. op.cit., p.55.
3. "Notes on Language and Style", Appendix III, in Roberts, M., T.E. Hulme, London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1938, pp.285-286.
4. ibid., p.281.
5. ibid., p.302.

than the apprehension of unexpected likenesses, to be exploited in little poems, whereas one always suspects that Breton's thoughts, though his apprehensions of such likenesses may eventually be translated into poetic images, move beyond the poems and become, in their turn, new cryptograms.

Peter Jones claims that Hulme took and developed from Remy de Gourmont's Le Problème du style the idea that language is always on the point of extinction and that it must be injected constantly with fresh metaphors.<sup>1</sup> This point is discussed in some detail by Christine Brooke-Rose, who argues that the very use of the word "image" for "metaphor" was the usage of the time, and in English stemmed from Remy de Gourmont, before adding that;

"..... in Esthétique de la langue française (p.43) he (Remy de Gourmont) deals with dead metaphors that lie dormant in language and the way in which all languages continually create new metaphors spontaneously, and he calls this 'l'art de "créer des images".' But in La Culture des Idées he tells us that any unusual combination of words makes a new image, even if unintentional." 2

on / Going from this, Jones mentions Hulme's insistence that if the sentence or phrase were regarded as the unit of meaning instead of the word, the relation between words within that sentence or phrase would yield a spark of fresh analogies revealing a particular, singular intuition. This is the area Breton explores in his essay Les mots sans rides, to be discussed presently, but there Breton implies that both of these approaches are valid.

Perhaps the most important idea of Remy de Gourmont underlying Imagist aesthetics is his claim that

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1. op.cit., p.17.

2. A ZBC of Ezra Pound, London: Faber and Faber, 1971, p.96.



"....La sensation est la base de tout, de la vie intellectuelle et morale aussi bien que de la vie physique. Deux cent cinquante ans après Hobbes, deux cent ans après Locke, telle a été la puissance destructive du kantisme religieux, qu'on en est réduit à insister sur d'aussi élémentaires aphorismes." 1

Remy / Because De Gourmont believed that the senses are the only means through which one acquires knowledge, he felt that the appeal of verse is to the senses. It is largely for this reason that Coffman concludes that

"....De Gourmont's discussion of imagery was more important for confirming the views of the later Imagists, especially Pound, who, like De Gourmont, kept aesthetics from becoming involved with the broad questions of metaphysics." 2

When Ezra Pound put forward the view that the "Image" is the furthest possible remove from rhetoric<sup>3</sup> and saw rhetoric as the art of dressing up some unimportant matter so as to fool the audience, he expressed an opinion that Breton would certainly have shared, for, as we shall see, Breton was to make a distinction between the metaphor and the simile on the one hand and "figures de rhétorique" on the other in Signe Ascendant. In the same article, however, Pound made an important differentiation between "Imagisme" and "Symbolisme":

"The symbolists dealt in 'association', that is, in a sort of allusion, almost of allegory. They degraded the symbol to the status of a word, they made it a form of metronomy. One can be grossly 'symbolic', for example, by using the term 'cross' to mean 'trial'. The symbolist's symbols have a fixed value, like numbers in arithmetic, like 1, 2 and 7. The imagist's images have a variable significance like the signs a, b, and x in algebra....the author must use his image because he sees it or feels it, not because he thinks he can use it to back up some creed or some system of ethics or economics..." 4

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1. Le Problème du style, Paris: Mercure de France, 1902, p.81.
  2. op.cit., p.84.
  3. The Fortnightly Review, Sept. 1914, pp.461-462; quoted in Jones, P., op.cit., p.21.
  4. ibid., pp.463-464; Jones, op.cit., p.21.

This is not only the "heart of Imagism", as Jones observes; it also explains one of the secrets of Breton's use of image and, in the latter stage of his career especially, of symbol: the analogies Breton detects usually have private and fluid qualities.

Pound's most famous definition of the "image" was made, however, at the beginning of "A Few Don'ts By An Imagiste":

"An 'Image' is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time. I use the term 'complex' rather in the technical sense employed by the newer psychologists, such as Hart, though we might not agree absolutely in our application.

It is the presentation of such a 'complex' instantaneously which gives that sense of sudden liberation; that sense of freedom from time limits and space limits; that sense of sudden growth, which we experience in the presence of the greatest works of art.

It is better to present one Image in a lifetime than to produce voluminous works." <sup>1</sup>

Pound's concept of "an intellectual and emotional complex" remains very vague, however, and is no more satisfactory than Breton's criteria for the image in the Manifeste, even though he attempts to expand the notion of a "complex" in As for Imagisme:

"The image can be of two sorts. It can arise within the mind. It is then 'subjective'. External causes play upon the mind perhaps; if so, they are drawn into the mind, fused, transmitted, and emerge in an Image unlike themselves. Secondly, the 'Image' can be 'objective'. Emotion seizing upon some external scene or action carries it in fact to the mind; and that vortex purges it of all save the essential or dominant or dramatic qualities, and it emerges like the external original.

In either case the Image is more than an idea. It is a vortex or cluster of fused ideas and is endowed with energy. If it does not fulfil these specifications, it is not what I mean by an Image." <sup>2</sup>

This distinction between "subjective" and "objective" images is interesting; it reveals the existence of two types of perception, "intellectual" as well as physical; and it is undoubtedly the case that most, if not all, poets with any serious pretension to the

1. Jones, op.cit., p.130.

2. From Poetry, March 1913; in Jones, op.cit., Appendix A, p.129.

title, employ both types. The final paragraph of the quotation moves on from perception to make it clear that Pound's conception of the word "image" is that of the "poetic image", bringing together two, or a series of terms; but, what is more important, it employs a similar criterion of energy to that suggested by Breton's criterion of the "spark" of an image and of dynamic "convulsive beauty", and, of course, to Donald Davie's idea of "articulate energy". The terms "subjective" and "objective", related to images, make us think of that other important new concept, formulated by a contemporary poet in English, T.S. Eliot's "objective correlative":

"The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an 'objective correlative'; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked." <sup>1</sup>

This comes very close, in fact, to the basic process of symbolism, and helps to explain Breton's presentation of landscape in Arcane 17 and in the Ode à Charles Fourier. Yet though it adds a new term to the lexicon of critics, it is no more satisfactory than the other concepts and definitions we have encountered thus far.

The other basic expressions of the theories behind Imagism are contained in F.S. Flint's "three rules" and the six principles enumerated in the Preface to Some Imagist Poets 1915.

Flint's three rules were:

- "(i) Direct treatment of the 'thing', whether subjective or objective.
- (ii) To use absolutely no word that did not contribute to the presentation.
- (iii) As regarding rhythm: to compose in sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of a metronome." <sup>2</sup>

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1. 'Hamlet' (1919), Selected Essays, London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1934, p.145.

2. From Poetry, March 1913; in Jones, op.cit., Appendix A, p.129.



The six principles, seen by the Imagists as the essentials of all great poetry, indeed of all great literature, were:

- "(i) To use the language of common speech, but to employ always the exact word, not the nearly-exact, nor the merely decorative word.
- (ii) To create new rhythms - as the expression of new moods - and not to copy old rhythms, which merely echo old moods. We do not insist upon 'free-verse' as the only method of writing poetry. We fight for it as a principle of liberty. We believe that the individuality of a poet may often be better expressed in free-verse than in conventional forms. In poetry, a new cadence means a new idea.
- (iii) To allow absolute freedom in the choice of subject. It is not good art to write badly about aeroplanes and automobiles; nor is it necessarily bad art to write well about the past. We believe passionately in the artistic value of modern life, but we wish to point out that there is nothing so uninspiring nor so old-fashioned as an aeroplane of the year 1911.
- (iv) To present an image (hence the name: 'Imagist'). We are not a school of painters, but we believe that poetry should render particulars exactly and not deal in vague generalities, however magnificent and sonorous. It is for this reason that we oppose the cosmic poet, who seems to us to shirk the real difficulties of his art.
- (v) To produce poetry that is hard and clear, never blurred nor indefinite.
- (vi) Finally, most of us believe that concentration is of the very essence of poetry." <sup>1</sup>

Breton does not talk in the same terms, but by and large would perhaps agree with a number of these points: despite his tendency to use a rather long line, he employs no superfluous and inexact words in his poems, if not quite the "language of common speech"; his lines give the impression of a natural rhythm, hard to define in terms of metre or of syntax; he would fight for free verse as a principle of liberty; he usually expresses a new idea, or rather a new image, by means of a new cadence; there is enormous variety and frequent innovation in his choice of subject-matter; his images possess what one might call a clarity of texture even when they present vapour on

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1. In Jones, op.cit., Appendix C, p.135.

a window-pane or the "veiled erotic"; he relies on the suggestion of sensation and exploits the space between words and simple juxtaposition of words for this purpose. In any case, as Donald Davie observes about "concentration" in poetry:

" 'Concentration' can come by many ways into poetry, down the avenues of dream, through the key-hole of innuendo, sidling through the false walls of irony, or shooting through a trapdoor from the cellars of the unconscious." <sup>1</sup>

So there are some similarities between Surrealist and Imagist concepts and theories. The debt to French Symbolism acknowledged by all the Imagists, except perhaps for Richard Aldington,<sup>2</sup> points to a common ancestry even though Surrealists may at times have tended to deny it, but there is, as we shall see, some evidence in Breton's poetry to justify regarding it as Symbolism's prehensile tail as much as the prehensile tail of Romanticism Breton once called it.

When it comes to the definition of the new image, none of the attempts of the Imagists is more satisfactory than Breton's list of types of surrealist images in the Manifeste. As is the case with most poets, one derives far more pleasure and satisfaction from their poetry than from their theory. The Imagists and the Surrealists may have had a common belief in, and a not too dissimilar concept of, the image, and both use the term "image" for "metaphor", but they do differ clearly in their practice of poetry, despite the fact that both schools employed the "vers libre" as their normal metrical form. As Coffman explains:

1. Articulate Energy, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1955, p.60.
2. v. Coffman, op.cit., p.168: "Referring to a book by De Gourmont, Aldington wrote: 'by a Symbolist, and that won't take', though he later tempered this attitude to a certain extent: 'We disliked the cosmic, the Bridges-like, the Masfieldian, the Georgian and the Symbolists (these last we tolerated).'" ("Modern Poetry and the Imagists", The Egoist, Vol.I, No.11, June 1, 1914, p.201.





Ou encore comme la formule

Teinture de passiflore	}	aa 50 cent. cubes
Teinture d'aubépine		
Teinture de gui		5 cent. cubes
Teinture de scille		3 cent. cubes

qui combat le bruit de galop" (CT 126-127)

In Aldington's Images, though the things compared (gondola/woman; smoke/birds/love; beech-tree/woman) are more or less "distant realities", there is a quality of naturalness about the comparisons; the motion of the gondola evokes superbly the smooth and silent entry of the beloved into the poet's life; the semantic distance between smoke and birds is narrowed by the intermediary image of the clouds, and again the ethereal and silent movement of love is presented aptly with the image of the rising and vanishing smoke; and the basic idea behind the third comparison, the sudden rustling of the wind through the leaves, is virtually a cliché, but a cliché into which new life is breathed.

In contrast, in Breton's poem, one bond between the seasons and the quarters of an apple (the number 4) has, in fact, been undermined earlier in the poem by the line,

"Et les saisons qui ne sont pas quatre mais quinze ou seize".

So, in the first example, the only obvious remaining bond between the two terms is the quality of light or lightness (the luminosity of the seasons and the white flesh of the apple). The sole obvious link between the "saisons lumineuses" and the "quartier excentrique" is the reference to the word "quartier", albeit in a different sense, in the previous line. The third comparison, with the "vent de l'esprit", again set in motion by a phrase in the previous line, presumably stems from the more conventional association of the spirit and a flame, so there is here the substitution of one of the four elements for another, though wind, of course, fans the flames; the suggestion

of fire in the line, though it is only implicit, comes from the reference to the shoeing of horses in a smithy. Although Gérard Legrand explains the comparison with a formula at the end of the Breton quotation in terms of a "collage verbal",

"Il y en a un très bel exemple dans un poème de Breton, c'est l'apparition d'une formule pharmaceutique qui arrive après sa désignation scientifique, la formule qui combat le 'bruit de galop', c'est-à-dire le syndrome de l'angine de poitrine..... puis le poème suit son cours d'une manière normale, si tant est qu'un poème ait un cours normal", <sup>1</sup>

this does not account convincingly for the comparison with the formula in the first place. Once more this particular comparison is the result of an association of ideas, for the allusion to the shoeing of horses, and possibly also the allusion to algebra, in the previous line, leads the poet to think of the "bruit de galop" the concoction is intended to combat. The links between tenor and vehicle in Breton's comparisons exist, but they have to be "winkled out"; in Aldington's poem they become apparent as soon as the impression of freshness has passed. This basic difference has been brought out clearly by Stephen Spender:

"In fact, most Imagist poetry is notable not so much for the audacity of the images, as for the use of word and form to do nothing except create the image..... Surrealism was the attempt to liberate among the sane the forces of insanity to construct a world after the pattern of man's most hidden dreams and desires." <sup>2</sup>

Imagism was not very well known, certainly not in France, though the Mercure de France gave its readers a brief notice on the English poets, and, of course, it faded from view as a movement fairly quickly, whereas Surrealism expanded and constantly absorbed new adherents, poets and artists alike.

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1. Surréalisme, Langage et Communication, in Alquié, F. (ed.), Entretiens sur le surréalisme, Mouton: Paris, La Haye, 1968, p.40.
  2. The Struggle of the Modern, London: Methuen, 1965, pp.113-114.

Yet the Imagists have exerted a considerable influence on subsequent poetry in English. Donald Davie goes so far as to claim:

"I get the impression that Hulme's views about the nature of poetical language are the ideas most generally current, almost the standard ideas, among poets and their readers today, at least in the English-speaking world." <sup>1</sup>

For this reason the comparison between Breton and the Imagists in this chapter, especially its conclusion about the difficulty in formulating a new concept and definition of the image, helps to place Breton's discussion of the image in the Manifeste in a useful and enlightening perspective.

So, with the various influences on Breton and the almost contemporary ideas of the Imagists in mind, we can proceed to a fuller examination of Breton's poetics.

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1. Articulate Energy, p. 13.



### CHAPTER THREE

#### BRETON'S DISCUSSION OF THE IMAGE IN THE "MANIFESTE DU SURREALISME".<sup>1</sup>

In this chapter on Breton's first Surrealist manifesto we come to his famous comments on the image and his list of surrealist images. We shall attempt to make a fresh assessment of their significance and value as guides to an appreciation of Breton's poetry. One cannot begin to consider seriously the image in Breton's poetry without prior reference to the Manifeste, where he already takes for granted the importance of the image in poetry.

This chapter does not set out to be a complete analysis of the Manifeste. For the purposes of the present study, the few pages in which Breton writes about the image outweigh all the others, though from other points of view, of course, the rest of this book has continued to exercise an immense influence. Nonetheless, a few very brief general comments on the Manifeste are required in order to set Breton's remarks on the image in their context.

The opening pages are devoted to an expression of Breton's belief in the importance of man's imagination, though he feels disturbed by what he sees as the lack of imagination in everyday life, where the dominance of "Realist attitudes", exemplified for him by the vast number of novels being produced, appals him.

Breton links the question of imagination to that of madness; and this was an important step in Breton's quest for a new kind of lyricism, a problem which had preoccupied him ever since he started thinking seriously about poetry, as was seen when we considered the influence of Reverdy's theories, where the question of the image is

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1. Paris: Eds. du Sagittaire chez Simon Kra, 1924.

related explicitly to that of lyricism.

An even more important step, however, in the period from 1919 to 1924, was Breton's relating of the question of imagination to Freud's discoveries concerning the functioning of the subconscious mind. After reading Freud Breton arrived at the conclusion that the source of the imagination lies in the subconscious and that the subconscious must therefore be the repository of untold hidden treasures.

(Already in Les Pas perdus Breton had pointed to the links between the notion of inspiration, the phenomenon of poetic creation and the exploration of the subconscious mind:

"On a parlé d'une exploration systématique de l'inconscient. Ce n'est pas d'aujourd'hui que des poètes s'abandonnent pour écrire à la pente de leur esprit. Le mot inspiration, tombé je ne sais pourquoi en désuétude, était pris naguère en bonne part. Presque toutes les trouvailles d'images, par exemple, me font l'effet de créations spontanées. Guillaume Apollinaire pensait avec raison que des clichés comme 'lèvres de corail' dont la fortune peut passer pour un critérium de valeur étaient le produit de cette activité qu'il qualifiait de surréaliste. Les mots eux-mêmes n'ont sans doute pas d'autre origine." (PP 90)

In the essay entitled Entrée des médiums (PP 147-158) Breton had written about the use certain Surrealists had made of hypnotic sleep as a means of exploring the subconscious. The reading of Freud, however, led Breton to turn his thoughts to other possible keys to the subconscious: the examination of dreams and automatic writing.)

In the Manifeste Breton praises Freud's study of dreams, and finds it inadmissible that such an important part of the psychic activity should have received so little attention in comparison with the attention given to man's behaviour during his waking hours; and in his enthusiasm for the dream activity, in his desire to establish its importance, Breton defines the state of "surréalité", a term he

and his friends had coined, as a result of the fusion of dream and reality:

"Je crois à la résolution future de ces deux états, en apparence si contradictoires, que sont le rêve et la réalité, en une sorte de réalité absolue, de surréalité, si l'on peut ainsi dire. C'est à sa conquête que je vais, certain de n'y pas parvenir mais trop insoucieux de ma mort pour ne pas supputer un peu les joies d'une telle possession." (M 24)

This is a statement which is absolutely fundamental to Surrealism. In the desire for a fusion of dream and reality one sees at work the essence of the dialectic method Breton will develop in the Second Manifeste du Surréalisme (1930), a principle which will be at the core of his later conception of what the term "surréalisme" involves.

The first Manifeste, however, does not pursue the study of dreams: that, or rather the interrelation of dream and reality, will be one of the tasks of Les Vases communicants. Much of the remainder of the Manifeste stems from the discovery by Breton in 1919 of automatic writing, and it is in the precise context of the implications of this discovery that the famous remarks on the image are placed.

The actual discovery of automatic writing had been described by Breton in Les Pas perdus,<sup>1</sup> but in the Manifeste he gives a similar account and mentions one of the strange phrases to which he had referred in the earlier text:

"Un soir donc, avant de m'endormir, je perçus, nettement articulée au point qu'il était impossible d'y changer un mot, mais distraite cependant du bruit de toute voix, une assez bizarre phrase qui me parvenait sans porter trace des événements auxquels, de l'aveu de ma conscience, je me trouvais mêlé à cet instant-là, phrase qui me parut insistante, phrase oserais-je dire qui cognait à la vitre. J'en pris rapidement notion et me disposais à passer outre quand son caractère organique me retint. En vérité cette phrase m'étonnait; je ne l'ai malheureusement pas retenue jusqu'à ce jour, c'était quelque chose comme: 'Il y a un

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1. op.cit., pp.149-150.



homme coupé en deux par la fenêtre', mais elle ne pouvait souffrir d'équivoque, accompagnée qu'elle était de la faible représentation visuelle d'un homme marchant et tronçonné à mi-hauteur par une fenêtre perpendiculaire à l'axe de son corps." (M 31)

Breton realizes that there is a very simple, rational explanation of this sentence. The man in question looks as if he is cut in two because he is leaning out of the window and only the top half of his body is visible to the outside observer. Breton is not deterred, however, by this rational explanation. He knows that it does not invalidate the poetic potential of the sentence:

"Mais cette fenêtre ayant suivi le déplacement de l'homme, je me rendis compte que j'avais affaire à une image d'un type assez rare et je n'eus vite d'autre idée que de l'incorporer à mon matériel de construction poétique. Je ne lui eus pas plus tôt accordé ce crédit que d'ailleurs elle fit place à une succession à peine intermittente de phrases qui ne me surprirent guère moins et me laissèrent sous l'impression d'une gratuité telle que l'empire que j'avais pris jusque-là sur moi-même me parut illusoire et que je ne songeai plus qu'à mettre fin à l'interminable querelle qui a lieu en moi." (M 31-32)

Breton sees the connection between such strange phrases, which seemed to be given to him quite gratuitously, and a method advocated by Freud in the treatment of some of his patients, the method known as "la pensée parlée":<sup>1</sup>

"Tout occupé que j'étais encore de Freud à cette époque et familiarisé avec ses méthodes d'examen que j'avais eu quelque peu l'occasion de pratiquer sur des malades pendant la guerre, je résolus d'obtenir de moi ce qu'on cherche à obtenir d'eux, soit un monologue de débit aussi rapide que possible, sur lequel l'esprit critique du sujet ne fasse porter aucun jugement, qui ne s'embarrasse, par suite, d'aucune réticence, et qui soit aussi exactement que possible la pensée parlée." (M 32-33)

When Breton discovers that the speed of one's thought is not greater than that of one's speech, and not necessarily greater than one's writing speed, he decides to produce a series of texts using this technique. He brings his close friend and fellow-poet, Philippe

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1. The term used in English is "free association".

Soupault, into the act, so to speak, and the fruit of the experiment was the book generally recognized as the first Surrealist work, Les Champs magnétiques.<sup>1</sup>

Although Breton refers only to Freud in the Manifeste, when he is discussing "la pensée parlée" and "l'écriture automatique", in fact the latter term, which was to be the one used by the Surrealists, had been employed by the psychiatrist Pierre Janet, some of whose works were set books for medical students at the time. Philippe Soupault pointed out this origin of the Surrealists' use of the term "écriture automatique" in his tribute to Breton in the special number of the NRF brought out a few months after the latter's death:

"Au cours de nos recherches qu'André méditait pendant ses nuits d'insomnie (il fut dès son adolescence insomniaque) il me fit constater que 'l'esprit dégagé de toutes les pressions critiques et des habitudes scolaires offrait des images et non des propositions logiques' et il m'affirmait que si nous acceptions ce que le psychiatre Pierre Janet avait appelé l'écriture automatique, nous pourrions noter des textes qui nous permettraient de décrire un 'univers' inexploré." <sup>2</sup>

The best evaluation of the influence of Janet on Breton, as far as the use of automatic writing is concerned, is found, however, in Professor Balakian's important study, André Breton: Magus of Surrealism.<sup>3</sup> She makes the very significant observation that Janet, unlike Freud, was constantly aware of the implications of automatic writing for the exploration of the normal mind.

The Manifeste reveals the extent to which Breton in 1924

1. Parts were published in numbers 8-10 (Oct.-Déc. 1919) of the review Littérature, founded by Aragon, Breton and Soupault in March of that year, but it came out in toto at the end of May, 1920 (Paris: Au Sans Pareil).
2. André Breton et le mouvement surréaliste, Paris: NRF, April 1967, pp.664-665.
3. op.cit., pp.28-34.

equates automatism with Surrealism. "Surréalisme" is, in fact, defined in terms of automatism in the now famous "dictionary" definitions in the book, where Breton tries to explain once and for all the very precise sense in which he and his friends understand the word:

"SURREALISME, n.m. Automatisation psychique pur par lequel on se propose d'exprimer, soit verbalement, soit par écrit, soit de toute autre manière, le fonctionnement réel de la pensée. Dictée de la pensée, en l'absence de tout contrôle exercé par la raison, en dehors de toute préoccupation esthétique ou morale.

ENCYC. Philos. Le surréalisme repose sur la croyance à la réalité supérieure de certaines formes d'association négligées jusqu'à lui, à la toute-puissance du rêve, au jeu désintéressé de la pensée. Il tend à ruiner définitivement tous les autres mécanismes psychiques et à se substituer à eux dans la résolution des principaux problèmes de la vie. Ont fait acte de SURREALISME ABSOLU MM. Aragon, Baron, Boiffard, Breton, Carrive, Crevel, Delteil, Desnos, Eluard, Gérard, Limbour, Malkine, Morise, Naville, Noll, Péret, Picon, Soupault, Vitrac." (M 35)

Although parts of Les Champs magnétiques had been published five years earlier to serve as illustrations of Surrealist automatic writing, Breton chose to include in the Manifeste a series of examples from the texts of fellow Surrealists (Soupault, Vitrac, Eluard, Morise, Delteil, Aragon), of which the most fascinating is perhaps this one from the pen of Max Morise:

"L'ours des cavernes et son compagnon le butor, le vol-au-vent et son valet le vent, le grand Chancelier avec sa chancelière, l'épouvantail à moineaux et son compère le moineau, l'éprouvette et sa fille l'aiguille, le carnassier et son frère le carnaval, le balayeur et son monocle, le Mississippi et son petit chien, le corail et son pot-au-lait, le Miracle et son bon Dieu n'ont plus qu'à disparaître de la surface de la mer." (M 38)

This sentence contains a whole series of puns and other forms of word-play, images merging the abstract and the concrete, bizarre juxtapositions and "dépaysements", the whole forming a bustling tableau and culminating in the modification of a set expression, in which "la mer" replaces its more or less opposite, "la terre", without being more obviously inappropriate, let alone absurd.

After his definition and brief illustration of Surrealism,



Breton gives some practical advice to would-be Surrealists in the section entitled "Secrets de l'Art magique surréaliste", beginning with the instructions about the conditions required for automatic writing:

"Faites-vous apporter de quoi écrire, après vous être établi en un lieu aussi favorable que possible à la concentration de votre esprit sur lui-même. Placez-vous dans l'état le plus passif, ou réceptif, que vous pourrez. Faites abstraction de votre génie, de vos talents et de ceux de tous les autres. Dites-vous bien que la littérature est un des plus tristes chemins qui mènent à tout. Ecrivez vite sans sujet préconçu, assez vite pour ne pas retenir et ne pas être tenté de relire. La première phrase viendra toute seule, tant il est vrai qu'à chaque seconde il est une phrase étrangère à notre pensée consciente qui ne demande qu'à s'extérioriser. Il est assez difficile de se prononcer sur le cas de la phrase suivante; elle participe sans doute à la fois de notre activité consciente et de l'autre, si l'on admet que le fait d'avoir écrit la première entraîne un minimum de perception. Peu doit vous importer, d'ailleurs; c'est en cela que réside, pour la plus grande part, l'intérêt du jeu surréaliste. Toujours est-il que la ponctuation s'oppose sans doute à la continuité absolue de la coulée qui nous occupe, bien qu'elle paraisse aussi nécessaire que la distribution des noeuds sur une corde vibrante. Continuez autant qu'il vous plaira. Fiez-vous au caractère inépuisable du murmure. Si le silence menace de s'établir pour peu que vous ayez commis une faute: une faute, peut-on dire, d'inattention, rompez sans hésiter avec une ligne trop claire. A la suite du mot dont l'origine vous semble suspecte, posez une lettre quelconque, la lettre l par exemple, toujours la lettre l, et ramenez l'arbitraire en imposant cette lettre pour initiale au mot qui suive." (M 39-40)

It would appear that Les Champs magnétiques had been written in this way. Breton is at great pains to indicate dangers which might beset the person producing the automatic text. He is determined to ensure that the text should reproduce as faithfully as possible the dictation of the "voix surréaliste". In the quotation the second sentence is the most important: "Placez-vous dans l'état le plus passif, le plus réceptif, que vous pourrez". The poet must be in a state of receptivity before images of the desired quality will manifest themselves. As Sarane Alexandrian points out with reference to this very passage:

"Il y a donc une mise en condition préalable; il faut un 'lieu favorable'.... il faut également un état de distraction détachant l'esprit des contingences du monde. Il est certain qu'un homme dans un état ordinaire n'obtiendra qu'un débit banal, pareil au monologue intérieur transcrit par les romanciers à des fins réalistes. Il ne doit pas être hors de lui, mais totalement en lui, au point d'atteindre sous sa conscience le flux vital qui échappe au jugement critique." <sup>1</sup>

A few pages earlier Breton had stressed the vital difference between the Surrealists and certain of their precursors, that the Surrealists were content to be simple recording-instruments, noting down the message of the "bouche d'ombre":

"Mais nous, qui ne nous sommes livrés à aucun travail de filtration, qui nous sommes faits dans nos oeuvres les sourds réceptacles de tant d'échos, les modestes appareils enregistreurs qui ne s'hypnotisent pas sur le dessin qu'ils tracent, nous servons peut-être une plus noble cause." (M 37)

The remaining "Secrets de l'art magique surréaliste" are more frivolous in tone: there is advice "pour ne pas s'ennuyer en compagnie", "pour faire des discours", "pour écrire de faux romans", "pour se bien faire voir d'une femme qui passe dans la rue", (advice which appears to have been censored), and a final paragraph "contre la mort".

Breton then returns to the more serious purpose of the Manifeste, as he starts to talk about Surrealism and language, and it is the discussion of this topic which serves as the immediate prelude to the consideration of the image. The section begins with the provocative claim:

"Le langage a été donné à l'homme pour qu'il en fasse un usage surréaliste." (M 42)

According to Breton, language presents no problems, when it is regarded merely as a means of communication, and so he wonders why one should be more critical, when one is faced with more delicate, more

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1. André Breton par lui-même, Paris: Edns. du Seuil, 1971, p.37.

subtle questions. He has full confidence in what he says or writes, at both the literary and the non-literary levels; so, with automatic writing obviously very much in mind, he can claim:

"Si telle ou telle phrase de moi me cause sur le moment une légère déception, je me fie à la phrase suivante pour racheter ses torts, je me garde de la recommencer ou de la parfaire." (M 42)

Consequently Breton can make the following crucial statement:

"Seule la moindre perte d'élan pourrait m'être fatale. Les mots, les groupes de mots qui se suivent pratiquent entre eux la plus grande solidarité." (*ibid.*)

These words are a natural development of an idea expressed previously in what is perhaps the most important essay in Les Pas perdus, the one given the title Les mots sans rides, which ends with an apparently amusing, but in truth a very serious observation, resulting from Breton's inability to dismiss as mere "jeux de mots" the six "calembours" signed by Rrose Sélavy and published in LITTERATURE:

"Et qu'on comprenne bien que nous disons: jeux de mots quand ce sont nos plus sûres raisons d'être qui sont en jeu. Les mots du reste ont fini de jouer. Les mots font l'amour." (PP 171)

Breton feels he is able to give words their freedom. He believes, for instance, that relationships of sound, operating between words, are as valid as relationships of meaning. He appears to regard automatic writing as a possible short-cut solution to the problem of translating perception into words.

Breton discovered in the course of the various experiments and games he and his friends devised that dialogue is a particularly suitable generator of surrealist language.<sup>1</sup> The reason for this is

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1. The most famous game was the "jeu du cadavre exquis", described thus by Breton and Eluard in their Dictionnaire abrégé du surréalisme: "Jeu de papier plié qui consiste à faire composer une phrase ou un dessin par plusieurs personnes, sans qu'aucune d'elles puisse tenir compte de la collaboration ou des collaborations précédentes. L'exemple devenu classique, qui a donné son nom au jeu tient dans la première phrase obtenue de cette manière: Le cadavre - exquis - boira - le vin - nouveau." (Eluard, P., O.C., t. 1, Paris: Gallimard, 1968, p.730.)



quite simply that Breton sees in the very nature of dialogue a fundamental disorder. He claims that the attention one speaker lends to the other is "external", one might even say superficial. To demonstrate his case, Breton cites the very extreme examples of the kinds of answer given by patients suffering from certain mental illnesses: echolalia and Ganser symptoms.<sup>1</sup>

Although Breton is clearly overstating his case, he uses these examples as the basis for a claim that there is something of this type of disorder in any conversation. It is concealed only by our natural sociability and habit.

Breton's theories about the particular merits of dialogue are put to the test when two or more writers work together to produce a recueil. This was the case with Les Champs magnétiques, especially in the section Barrières, for whereas most of the texts in that book were written by Breton and Soupault separately, Breton points out in the Manifeste that in Barrières there was a constant interplay and exchange of phrases between the two voices. One of the virtues of this surrealist dialogue is that it helps to maintain the flow of images the poets are seeking; and in the course of this study other examples of collaboration will be discussed from time to time.

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1. "Cela est si vrai que dans certains états mentaux pathologiques où les troubles sensoriels disposent de toute l'attention du malade, celui-ci, qui continue à répondre aux questions, se borne à s'emparer du dernier mot prononcé devant lui ou du dernier membre de phrase surréaliste dont il trouve trace dans son esprit:  
 'Quel âge avez-vous? Vous. (Echolalie).  
 'Comment vous appelez-vous? - Quarante-cinq maisons! (Symptôme de Ganser ou de réponses à côté). (M 43-44)  
 cf. Weber, J.P., Genèse de l'oeuvre poétique, Paris: Gallimard, 1960, p.523: "La répétition par l'enfant de phénomènes adultes, imitation maladroite, globale, écho imparfait, intervient bien avant la compréhension des phrases et des mots. L'enfant est alors sensible exclusivement à l'allure globale du discours entendu, dont il cherche à reproduire les sonorités, le rythme, les intonations. L'écholalie est un phénomène infantile qui se perpétue à travers tous les stades de l'apprentissage du langage."

Breton then seems to extend the scope and power of Surrealism, for he speaks of its insidious effects, akin to those of drugs, on its exponents:

"..... par bien des côtés le surréalisme se présente comme un vice nouveau, qui ne semble pas devoir être l'apanage de quelques hommes; il a comme le haschisch de quoi satisfaire tous les délicats - une telle analyse ne peut manquer de trouver place dans cette étude." ( 45)

On closer examination Breton discovers that in fact there is a strong resemblance between what he calls surrealist images, the characteristic images produced by automatic writing, and the hallucinatory images perceived when one is under the influence of opium. Quoting Baudelaire, Breton insists on the spontaneity of these images, and implies that the opium addict, or the poet, receives them in a passive, if contented, frame of mind:

"Il en va des images surréalistes comme de ces images de l'opium que l'homme n'évoque plus, mais qui 's'offrent à lui, spontanément, despotiquement. Il ne peut pas les congédier, car la volonté n'a plus de force et ne gouverne plus les facultés.' " (ibid.) 1

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1. Breton is obliged to rely on the authority of Baudelaire in making his analogy, for it would appear that his first-hand knowledge of the effects of drugs was limited to one experience, and that was some years later. (v. Alexandre, M., Mémoires d'un surréaliste, Paris: La Jeune Parque, 1968, p.151). It may appear rather odd that Breton did not repeat the experiment, given his preoccupation with, and constant search for, surprising and even hallucinatory images, but he was, of course, aware of the obvious dangers.

Ferdinand Alquié suggests with reference to this remark by Breton a rather unexpected source:

"Mais plus directement encore, il (Breton) reprend à son compte une théorie qui domina l'enseignement philosophique jusqu'aux environs de 1935, théorie selon laquelle l'imagination est une faculté 'réaliste', les images tendant d'elles-mêmes à s'imposer à nous et à se donner pour réelles." (Philosophie du surréalisme, p.170).

In a footnote he explains that this was the theory of V.L. Dugas, postulated in Vocabulaire de psychologie (sic). Alquié claims that it is probable that the Surrealists' philosophy teachers would have professed similar ideas about images.

Having thus mentioned "surrealist images" Breton now discusses the topic at some length, and this part of the Manifeste is clearly the most important part, as far as the present study is concerned. Breton's awareness of the spontaneity of surrealist images leads him to express the doubt in the Manifeste whether it is possible to bring together voluntarily in a poetic image two "distant realities". It is thus on this point that his views on the creation of the poetic image differ from those of Reverdy. Breton insists:

"Le rapprochement se fait ou ne se fait pas, voilà tout." (M 45)

Breton cannot accept that certain of Reverdy's images bear witness to the slightest degree of premeditation. Therefore he flatly denies Reverdy's basic claim:

"Il est faux, selon moi, de prétendre que l'esprit a saisi les rapports des deux réalités en présence. Il n'a, pour commencer, rien saisi consciemment." (M 45-46)

Breton goes on to claim that there results from the very spontaneity and arbitrariness of the image its particular light, its particular spark, its particular appeal. It is interesting, and doubtless very significant, that light is not only a major theme of Breton's theory, but also a key-word in his poetics. Breton takes the power of the "spark" thus generated as his criterion for assessing the value of the image, though such a criterion must inevitably remain very subjective, and uses this as proof of the relative lack of interest the orthodox simile presents:

"La valeur de l'image dépend de la beauté de l'étincelle obtenue; elle est, par conséquent, fonction de la différence de potentiel entre les deux conducteurs. Lorsque cette différence existe à peine comme dans la comparaison, l'étincelle ne se produit pas." (M 46)

Many of the images in Breton's poems appear, in fact, to translate and evoke sudden flashes of illumination, of deep insight, and this



may be the very appropriate prime function of fleeting allusions to lightning, shooting stars and the glitter of crystals and precious stones.

The preference for the metaphor, or rather the image, ostensibly determines Surrealist poetics for nearly a quarter of a century, until Breton makes an important reassessment of the simile in Signe Ascendant.<sup>1</sup> C. Abastado, however, claims that when Breton in 1929, in the text Exposition X....., Y.....,<sup>2</sup> writes "le surréalisme, je le répète, (a) supprimé le mot comme", he treats the metaphor and the simile as the same thing, "il les confond",<sup>3</sup> but this probably distorts somewhat the meaning of Breton's words; Breton tends rather to treat the terms "image" and "métaphore" as synonyms, though in the Manifeste he uses the former more frequently.

Reverdy, in December 1919, in Self-Défense, had already suggested that, by linking the two terms of an image with a word such as "comme", a poet weakens it:

"J'ai préféré rapprocher plus directement encore les éléments divers par leurs simples rapports et me passer de tout intermédiaire pour obtenir l'image." 4

Breton claims in the Manifeste, as further support for his refusal to accept that the so-called arbitrary metaphor can be contrived artificially or voluntarily, that the principle of association of ideas would work against it. This is perhaps arguable, but the only alternative Breton could see was a return to an elliptical form of poetry both he and Reverdy condemned at that stage. As Breton

1. Written on October 30th, 1946; published in Néon, 1 (1 Jan.1948), n.p. (SA 7-13).
2. (PJ 55-58).
3. Abastado, C., Introduction au surréalisme, p.83.
4. op.cit., Paris: Imprimerie Littéraire, 1919, p.20; quoted in Greene, R.W., The Poetic Theory of Pierre Reverdy, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1967, p.37.

himself observes in the Manifeste (M 30) that the important last cycle of poems in his first recueil Mont de Piété, published in June 1919, relied largely on an elliptical technique, the aesthetic theories which lay behind those poems had thus been left behind. Breton by 1924 was ready to place his faith in the arbitrary metaphor, produced, as he insists, not as a result of careful deliberation, but spontaneously, by automatic writing:

"Force est donc bien d'admettre que les deux termes de l'image ne sont pas déduits l'un de l'autre par l'esprit en vue de l'étincelle à produire, qu'ils sont les produits simultanés de l'activité que j'appelle surréaliste, la raison se bornant à constater, et à apprécier le phénomène lumineux." (M 46)

Hence Breton decides that the basis of Surrealist poetics will be the arbitrary image, the metaphor in which the tenor and vehicle are "deux réalités distantes", an image which is spontaneous, not premeditated. This changes the whole course and the whole style not only of the poetry of Breton but also of that of many of his contemporaries. Breton's poetry in the following years was studded with these new images. Breton could see, as he was writing the Manifeste, that this must indeed be the case, for in his next point he quite clearly attaches paramount importance to them. Having reiterated that mechanical or automatic writing is particularly conducive to their production, Breton goes on:

"On peut même dire que ces images apparaissent, dans cette course vertigineuse, comme les seuls guidons de l'esprit. L'esprit se convainc peu à peu de la réalité de ces images.... Il va, porté par ces images qui le ravissent, qui lui laissent à peine le temps de souffler sur le feu de ses doigts. C'est la plus belle des nuits, la nuit des éclairs: le jour auprès d'elle, est la nuit." (M 46)

These few sentences are absolutely crucial, for they reveal perhaps the most important element in Breton's poetics from this point onwards: he is prepared to let himself be guided by the

images which appear to occur spontaneously or to be given to him gratuitously. The arbitrary images are to supplant the rational or logical idea, the carefully contrived sequence, the fabrication of lengthy reflection, in Breton's new poetics.<sup>1</sup> Breton's suspicion of rationalism leads him now to pin all his hopes on the arbitrary, surrealist image. Eluard was to express this same idea very succinctly in one of his most famous lines,

"Les images pensent pour moi."<sup>2</sup>

Breton mentions the possibility of compiling a classification of the various types of surrealist images. Though he was not prepared to do so systematically there and then, he does point out the vital quality they all have in common:

"Pour moi, la plus forte est celle qui présente le degré d'arbitraire le plus élevé, je ne le cache pas; celle qu'on met le plus longtemps à traduire en langage pratique...." (M 47)

After stating this initial requirement, Breton lists a few categories of surrealist images and gives an example for each one:

"..... soit qu'elle recèle une dose énorme de contradiction apparente, soit que l'un de ses termes en soit curieusement dérobé, soit que s'annonçant sensationnelle, elle ait l'air de se dénouer faiblement (qu'elle ferme brusquement l'angle de son compas), soit qu'elle tire d'elle-même une justification formelle dérisoire, soit qu'elle soit d'ordre hallucinatoire, soit qu'elle prête très naturellement à l'abstrait, le masque du concret, ou inversement, soit qu'elle implique la négation de quelque propriété physique élémentaire, soit qu'elle déchaîne le rire. Et voici, dans l'ordre, quelques exemples:

Le rubis du champagne. Lautréamont.

Beau comme la loi de l'arrêt du développement de la poitrine chez les adultes dont la propension à la croissance n'est pas en rapport avec la quantité de molécules que leur organisme s'assimile. Lautréamont.

Une église se dressait éclatante comme une cloche. Philippe Soupault.

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1. We are reminded, however, of T.S. Eliot's dictum, "There is a logic of the imagination as well as a logic of concepts." (Preface to *Anabasis*, by St. J. Perse, trans. T.S. Eliot, London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1959, p.10.)
  2. *Capitale de la Douleur*, Paris: Gallimard (Coll. 'Poésie'), 1966, p.232.



Dans le sommeil de Rrose Sélavy il y a un nain sorti d'un puits qui vient manger son pain la nuit. Robert Desnos.  
Sur le pont la rosée à tête de chatte se berçait. André Breton.  
Un peu à gauche, dans mon firmament deviné, j'aperçois - mais sans doute n'est-ce qu'une vapeur de sang et de meurtre - le brillant dépoli des perturbations de la liberté. Louis Aragon.  
Dans la forêt incendiée,  
Les lions étaient frais. Roger Vitrac.  
La couleur des bas d'une femme n'est pas forcément à l'image de ses yeux, ce qui a fait dire à un philosophe qu'il est inutile de nommer: "Les céphalopodes ont plus de raisons que les quadrupèdes de haïr le progrès." Max Morise." (47-48)

However provisional and however hastily compiled this list may be, it is the only one from Breton's pen the critic has at his disposal. Breton never produced a more systematic classification. This list in the Manifeste does at least provide a few terms for the critic to work with, as he attempts to evolve a new lexicon for the discussion of Breton's poetry, but, as will be seen, it does not really go far enough. It is possible that if some earlier studies of surrealist imagery, to which reference has been made in the Introduction, fall short of the mark, it is through their too slavish acceptance of Breton's classification, which was never intended to be more than a very random jotting down of a few basic types and features. In fact, one can probably begin to perceive better the true nature of the surrealist image by studying closely Breton's more obviously creative writings than this provisional classification in the Manifeste, and it is this assumption, this approach, that is being adopted in the present study.

On the other hand, one can hardly ignore totally Breton's list of surrealist images, which is quite famous, so we now propose to consider briefly each of the types he cites, to examine how they conform to the essential principles of Surrealism and to make a few general observations on the arbitrary image.

(a) The image of apparent contradiction.

This first type implies a fundamental denial of reality, or at least of the values of the "real" world. The very concept of contradiction belongs to a system based on reason and logic. It has been seen already (p.64) that in the opening pages of the Manifeste Breton was appalled by the dominance of "Realist attitudes". Moreover, he was beginning to feel that rationalism was no longer adequate:

"Nous vivons encore sous le règne de la logique, voilà, bien entendu, à quoi je voulais en venir. Mais les procédés logiques, de nos jours, ne s'appliquent plus qu'à la résolution de problèmes d'intérêt secondaire. Le rationalisme absolu qui reste de mode ne permet de considérer que des faits relevant étroitement de notre expérience." (M 20-21)

The image of apparent contradiction, or even of real contradiction, could perhaps have a role to play in the insidious undermining of the sway of rationalism. So, for the Surrealist, an image based on contradiction, whether it be apparent or real, becomes as valid as a confirmation or even a pleonasm.<sup>1</sup>

The image of apparent contradiction has obvious affinities with the absurd. Furthermore, like most surrealist images, in fact, it is frequently a source of humour.

The example given as an illustration of this kind of surrealist image is Lautréamont's "Le rubis du champagne". One's immediate reaction to this example is that it is not a very satisfactory choice, since the two terms, the "rubis" and the "champagne", are not really contradictory. They merely belong to different semantic areas. At first sight the two terms seem unrelated. They are poised

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1. In Langage cuit Desnos wrote a poem Vent nocturne, consisting largely of a series of pleonasms: v. Corps et Biens, Paris: Gallimard (Coll. 'Poésie'), 1968, p.71.

to cancel each other out. They epitomize the solid and the liquid. On closer examination, however, one can see that firstly the sparkling quality of the champagne is mirrored in the brilliant translucency of the precious stone in the play of light and secondly the mention of the ruby suggests the rosy tinge of pink champagne. Therefore, despite the apparent incongruity of the juxtaposition of "rubis" and "champagne" in this image, Lautréamont, in fact, pointed to hidden and unsuspected bonds between the two terms, and the crystalline and the fluid are fused in a heady image of "convulsive beauty" (v. infra).

If Breton had looked no further than his own recueil, Clair de Terre, he could have found a better illustration of the image of apparent contradiction in the phrase "Enfance vénérable" from the poem Plutôt la vie. (CT 73) Here the semblance of contradiction is created by the fundamental ambiguity of the adjective "vénérable", the major meanings of which are "digne de vénération" and "très vieux". One thinks automatically of the latter in this example, even though the former may be the more logical and more appropriate meaning.

Of course the idea of contradiction underlies other categories of surrealist images included by Breton in his list: the negation of an elementary physical property, possibly the merging of the abstract and the concrete, and the image which raises a laugh, to name just the most obvious. Moreover, there is nothing particularly new about an image in which there is an apparent contradiction. This will indeed be the case with a number of the types of image in Breton's list. Apparent contradiction is a well-known and well used source



of ambiguity in poetry.<sup>1</sup> Anna Balakian has shown the great importance of contradiction in Apollinaire's poetry and gives such headings as "the clarity of shadow", "the inaudibility of a piercing cry", "copulation under the dictatorship of the sterile giant Behemoth", "the symbol of this fertile sterility, putrefaction, which represents the creativeness of destruction", "the flight of the immovable".<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the principle of contradiction is perhaps as old as poetry itself, and the use of figures of speech based on contradiction goes back for centuries. Villon's poem, Ballade du concours de Blois, consists of a series of contradictory phrases; contradiction is a feature of Baroque poetry, where the oxymoron is a frequent figure; it is found in the works of Corneille, J.B. Rousseau, Hugo. Normally, however, in these works images of contradiction are isolated examples. The full potential of contradiction was rarely envisaged, not even by the acknowledged precursors of Surrealism. Although Breton chose a bad example from Les Chants de Maldoror, apparent contradiction is present in the works of Lautréamont. The fourth Chant opens with the following remark:

"C'est un homme ou une pierre ou un arbre qui va commencer le quatrième chant." <sup>3</sup>

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1. cf. Empson, W. Seven Types of Ambiguity, London: Chatto and Windus, 1949, p.176.
  2. Literary Origins of Surrealism, New York: King's Crown Press, 1947, pp.115-117.
  3. Lautréamont, O.C., Paris: Corti, 1961, p.250. It is fascinating that Bergson should have used the same three examples when he is discussing perception and memory: "Qu'il y ait, en un certain sens, des objets multiples, qu'un homme se distingue d'un autre homme, un arbre d'un arbre, une pierre d'une pierre, c'est incontestable, puisque chacun de ces êtres a des propriétés caractéristiques et obéit à une loi déterminée d'évolution. Mais la séparation entre la chose et son entourage ne peut être absolument tranchée; on passe, par gradations insensibles, de l'une à l'autre: l'étroite solidarité qui lie tous les objets de l'univers matériel, la perpétuité de leurs actions et réactions réciproques, prouve assez qu'ils n'ont pas les limites précises que nous leur attribuons..." (Matière et Mémoire, Paris: Félix Alcan, 1906, pp.233-234).

(note continued on p.83)

Lautréamont here appears to betray an attitude of sheer indifference rather than the tension W. Empson claimed that contradiction must imply, though on closer examination one quickly feels a tension emerging from the expectancy and the surprise the sentence generates.

In the Manifeste of 1924 Breton refrains from comment on the particular significance of images of apparent contradiction. Having rejected in theory the simile, though, as will be seen, it is never really rejected in practice, Breton turns his attention to the almost reverse process of contradiction, where the principle of similarity is replaced by dissimilarity in perhaps its most extreme form. When Breton writes the Second Manifeste du Surréalisme (1930), he is more concerned than he had been in 1924 with the reconciliation of contraries, because he was trying to relate Surrealism on the one hand to hermetic philosophy and on the other hand to Hegel's dialectic materialism.<sup>1</sup> In 1924 Breton merely presents

(note 3, p.82, continued). We have, of course, to remember and recognize that an almost infinite number of objects are composed of blends of atoms and molecules of a very finite number of elements. Consequently, apparently dissimilar phenomena are related not merely by rather vague qualities but also by the possession of the same elements, albeit in different proportions and combinations. This is, however, interesting evidence to support both Breton's desire to break down barriers between animal, vegetable and mineral and his belief in surprising associations and analogies in images.

1. Near the beginning of the Second Manifeste Breton claims:

"Tout porte à croire qu'il existe un certain point de l'esprit d'où la vie et la mort, le réel et l'imaginaire, le passé et le futur, le communicable et l'incommunicable, le haut et le bas cessent d'être perçus contradictoirement." (M 133)

When he alludes to what he will call, quite categorically, in L'Amour fou (1937) "le point suprême", he is thinking in occultist terms, for this notion is a fundamental principle of esoteric philosophy, as in the Zohar, for example.

Hegel's concept of the abolition of antinomies (thesis - anti-thesis - synthesis) is, of course, closely related to this question. As far as Hegel is concerned, his importance in this respect is recalled much later by Breton in the Entretiens:

"C'est incontestablement Hegel - et nul autre - qui m'a mis dans les conditions voulues pour apercevoir ce point, pour tendre de toutes mes forces vers lui et pour faire, de cette tension même, l'objet de ma vie." (E 151)

the image of apparent contradiction as a surrealist image, without seeing or at least without pointing out its obvious potential in the resolution of contraries, as the first step towards some eventual synthesis. One has the impression, in the first Manifeste, that it is included in Breton's list simply because it is a means of attacking reason and logic - this is its "surreal" quality -, and a remark in the essay in Les Pas perdus devoted to Les Chants de Maldoror suggests that Breton does not, in fact, accept the notion of contradiction:

"L'idée de la contradiction, qui demeure à l'ordre du jour, m'apparaît comme un non-sens." (PP 81)

This is presumably why Breton speaks merely of apparent contradiction.

(b) The image in which one of the terms is curiously hidden.

The technique of concealing, or even eliminating, one of the terms of an image had already been employed by Rimbaud and Mallarmé. As Rimbaud himself suggests in the mystifying last line of his prose-poem Parade,

"J'ai seul la clef de cette parade sauvage",<sup>1</sup>

the poet is the only person who knows for sure what the colourful characters in the parade represent.

The famous swan in Mallarmé's sonnet, Le vierge, le vivace et le bel aujourd'hui, is clearly a symbol, one term of an image; but the significance of the symbolism is not revealed in so many words; the other term of the image is missing. The reader is left to conjecture whether or not the swan is a representation of the poet.

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1. Rimbaud, A., Poésies, Une Saison en Enfer, Illuminations, Paris: Armand Colin, 1958, p.202.



In fact, this category of image cannot be very far removed from the traditional symbol, and in this respect it is interesting to compare Breton's words with Owen Barfield's description of the image with a missing term:

"Sometimes the element of comparison drops still farther out of sight. Instead of saying that A is like B or that A is B, the poet simply talks about B, without making any overt reference to A at all. You know, however, that he intends A all the time, or, better say that you know that he intends an A; for you may not have a very clear idea of what A is and even if you have got an idea, somebody else may have a different one. This is generally called 'symbolism'." <sup>1</sup>

Similarly George Williamson is prepared to "regard Symbolist poems as metaphors in which the major terms are not named".<sup>2</sup> However, Remy de Gourmont's description of metaphor is somewhat reminiscent of Breton's phrase:

"La comparaison est la forme élémentaire de l'imagination visuelle. Elle précède la métaphore, comparaison où manque l'un des termes, à moins que les deux termes ne soient fondus en un seul." <sup>3</sup>

Obviously Remy de Gourmont is oversimplifying in referring solely to "l'imagination visuelle" and his view of metaphor here is somewhat idiosyncratic.

The example Breton quotes to illustrate this second category of surrealist image is again taken from Lautréamont (v. supra, p.78), and again it is an unsatisfactory example, for in Les Chants de Maldoror the other term of the image is not missing. The example follows immediately the phrase "le vautour des agneaux", the tenor in the comparison. What is "surreal" about this image is not an

1. 'Poetic Diction and Legal Fiction', in Essays Presented to Charles Williams, London-New York-Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1947, p.107.
2. A Reader's Guide to T.S. Eliot, London: Thames and Hudson, 1971 edition, p.42.
3. Le Problème du Style, pp.86-87.

absent term, but rather the vast difference between the two terms of the image. Like the "rubis" and the "champagne" they belong to completely different semantic areas.

Breton could easily have chosen as his example the opening line of his own poem Le buvard de cendre,

"Les oiseaux s'ennuieront" (CT 66).

This stands in total isolation both from the title and from the rest of the poem, which goes on with the pertinent observation:

"Si j'avais oublié quelque chose".

The probable reason for the presence of this kind of image in Le buvard de cendre is that this poem may be a kind of "ready-made"; it is little more than a series of unconnected jottings, such as one might find on a blotting-pad. Hence the title! It is difficult, however, to see this line as a symbol, thus implying that the symbol is but one form of the image with a missing term, albeit the more profound and fascinating one.

It is distinctly possible that the inclusion of this category of image in Breton's list is a vestige of the influence on him of Mallarmé and Rimbaud, already evident in his pre-surrealist recueil Mont de Piété. Its only obvious "surreal" quality is its ability to undermine a logical sequence of ideas, though if it is dictated by the surrealist voice, it is "surreal" by virtue of the fact that it is a product of surrealism, in Breton's strict sense of the word, that of pure psychic automatism.

It is possible, however, that, as Breton's poetic career unfolds, this category of image is present, but in a more subtle manner, in the signs or indices Breton seeks and then perceives, signs which seem to be one half of an analogy, in which the other half, the other

term is temporarily absent or obscured. This is a form of symbolic imagery rather than metaphor, if one must separate the two. It is, of course, extremely difficult to give a satisfactory definition of "symbol": the most relevant section of the Oxford dictionary definition, "something that stands for, represents, or denotes something else (not by exact resemblance, but by vague suggestion, or by some accidental or conventional relation)", does not cover adequately the great diversity of types of symbols used in modern literature. More interesting and better are the Robert definitions: "Objet ou image ayant une valeur évocatrice, magique et mystique", "élément ou énoncé descriptif ou narratif qui est susceptible d'une double interprétation, sur le plan réaliste et sur le plan des idées", but even these give little indication of the form symbols can assume. The symbol is not necessarily an image (in the narrow sense of the word); it can take the form of a rhythm, an action, a structure, even a whole poem. Part of the problem is explained by Eméric Fiser's distinction in Le Symbole Littéraire between two types of symbols, a distinction suggested by his claim:

"En effet, tous les symbolistes, y compris Bergson et Proust, emploient le terme symbole, non pas dans le sens conforme à leurs théories, mais dans le sens que lui attribue le langage courant".<sup>1</sup>

In Breton's later poetry particularly both types are present, as we shall see.

(c) The image which suddenly closes the angle of its compass.

This category is clearly a form of anticlimax. The implication is that only a part of the image is arbitrary. This is seen in Soupault's line which serves as Breton's illustration of this variety

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1. op.cit., p.10.



of image. If the first half of the line, "Une église se dressait éclatante", were to be considered separately, it would possess a touch of synaesthesia; it would be read as an example of auditory hallucination, and would therefore be a genuine surrealist image (v. type "e"). The second half of the line, however, converts it into a simile. Only a couple of pages earlier in the Manifeste Breton had, after all, demonstrated the superiority, in his opinion, of the metaphor over the simile. The idea of "suddenly closing the angle of its compass", works, of course, against the principle of surprise, which is so important for the Surrealists, as it had been for Apollinaire, unless one can regard the unusual let-down as a surprise in itself.<sup>1</sup>

(d) The image which derives from itself an absurd formal justification.

The nature of this type of image is shown by the example Breton cites, one of the "aphorisms" of Rose Sélavy, alias Robert Desnos:

"Dans le sommeil de Rose Sélavy il y a un nain sorti d'un puits qui vient manger son pain la nuit."

It is a typical Desnos "calembour"; there is play on the pairs of words, "nain"/"pain" and "puits"/"nuit". The initial letters of the pairs are changed round. Any of the 150 sentences in Desnos's "recueil" Rose Sélavy could have served as an example. Similarly, any case of the modification of a proverb or a cliché, any pun, any

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1. The term used by Breton, "ferme brusquement l'angle de son compas", is very similar to the famous criterion of the "angle" of an image, devised later by R.A. Sayce: v. his Style in French Prose, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1953, pp.62 ff.; it also recalls Donne's famous metaphor of the two lovers' souls and the compasses:

"If they be two, they are two so,

As stiffe twin compasses are two....

(A Valediction: forbidding mourning).

homonym, would belong to this category.

However, as René Plantier has pointed out recently, there is a possible danger for metaphor in Desnos' experiments with puns and spoonerisms:

"Mais Desnos se heurte alors à un paradoxe: il est souvent nécessaire de lire le calembour pour découvrir les sens. Dans l'exemple cité par R. Bertelé, le premier vers: "moi j'aime l'épaule de la femme" peut être entendu "les pôles de la femme", mais pas du tout "de l'affame", comme l'écrit ensuite Desnos. Il y a donc trois lectures, mais pour un auditeur le jeu se limite au premier ou au deuxième vers. Il perd la création métaphorique: la femme/l'affame et tout ce qu'elle apporte de connotations symboliques." <sup>1</sup>

One has to accept, however, that this is a kind of poetry, if poetry it be, in which one has to read the text to appreciate its message.

Word-play is a constant feature of Surrealist poetry, whether or not one accepts Breton's dissatisfaction with the notion of "playing". It possibly reflects the way in which the subconscious mind distorts certain words or sounds, or associates words which have some phonetic resemblance. It stems, too, from the continuous pre-occupation of the Surrealists with language. This category of image is genuinely surrealist, in so far as it is the result of Breton's desire that words should be allowed to "make love". It usually contains some kind of distortion - semantic, lexical or grammatical -, and is presumably to be distinguished from type (h), the image which raises a laugh, because of the purely formal, purely verbal brand of humour it features.

(e) The image of a hallucinatory order.

Mention has already been made of the resemblance Breton had noticed between surrealist images and the hallucinatory images perceived when one is under the influence of certain drugs. Of course,

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1. L'écriture et la voix, in Europe, Desnos, mai-juin 1972, p.53.

men have long been aware of a relationship between hallucination and metaphor, as the following passage from W.M. Frohock's book, Rimbaud's Poetic Practice, indicates:

"Hallucination is, after all, the ultimate step in the formation of metaphor. Since Diderot at the latest, we have known that its components are not new to the hallucinated individual: the visionary who sees a dog using lobster claws for legs would be right in taking the monster to be unknown, but there is nothing new about either dogs or lobsters. What is new is the experience of a relationship: the hallucination has dislocated two perfectly familiar elements of our ordinary world and put them into a thoroughly unfamiliar, because unique, reassociation. Had the visionary called the dog's legs lobster claws while remaining aware that they were legs, he would have been playing the double game of metaphor. In other words, hallucination is metaphor masquerading as literal experience." <sup>1</sup>

In Alchimie du verbe, of course, Rimbaud had made the famous revelation about the poetic techniques he had employed during the "Voyance" period:

"Je m'habituai à l'hallucination simple: je voyais très-franchement une mosquée à la place d'une usine, une école de tambours faite par des anges, des calèches sur les routes du ciel, un salon au fond d'un lac; les monstres, les mystères; un titre de vaudeville dressait des épouvantes devant moi.

Puis j'expliquai mes sophismes magiques avec l'hallucination des mots!" <sup>2</sup>

These words presumably had a considerable effect on Breton and may be largely responsible for his decision to refer to the type of image in question as an image of a hallucinatory order rather than as a case of "dépaysement". Certainly this is one of the most characteristic types of surrealist image and one of the types most frequently encountered. Surrealist painting is likewise dominated by hallucinatory images.

When one examines more closely the particular qualities of both hallucination and surrealism, in the narrow sense of Breton's

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1. op.cit., Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1963, pp.84-85.
  2. Rimbaud, A., Poésies, Une Saison en Enfer, Illuminations, p.175.



"dictionary" definition, one is struck at once by their mutual affinities. The following paragraph gives a fairly recent typical account of a hallucinatory episode:

"At one extreme of systematization, the hallucinatory episode consists of a mere fragment which seems to come from nowhere and leads apparently to nothing. This we encounter in the common hypnagogic voice or vision which appears just as one is falling asleep. A face seems suddenly to loom up and quickly vanish or a phrase is enunciated that sounds meaningless or lacks a context. Sometimes there is a sentence or two, instead of an isolated phrase; or perhaps a somewhat less fragmentary visual apparition comes. In sleep, there is often a well-structured visual hallucination which, however, may be without a discoverable antecedent or consequent; it stands alone, motionless, and disappears without fading. The same holds true of auditory hallucination in sleep; a complex sound structure - organized music or a clear verbal statement - may come and go without apparent context."<sup>1</sup>

The famous phrase mentioned in the Manifeste, which ran, something like "Il y a un homme coupé en deux par la fenêtre", the phrase which led Breton to the experiments with automatic writing, is clearly an example of the isolated phrase "that sounds meaningless or lacks a context", to which Cameron and Magaret refer.

The essence of hallucination is distortion of reality. As this is likewise a basic aspect of Surrealism - the Manifeste had opened with an attack on the common notion of reality - it is to be expected that Surrealist poetry should appear to be hallucinatory. As will be seen, both Les Champs magnétiques and Clair de Terre contain numerous examples of visual and aural distortion or "dépaysement". Breton was clearly thinking of such images, when he included the image of a hallucinatory order in his provisional list of types of surrealist images.

In fact, behaviour pathologists point out that auditory and

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1. Cameron, N. and Magaret, A., Behavior Pathology, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Riverside Press, 1951, p.431.

visual hallucinations, in that order, are the commonest experienced. Despite the importance Breton will come to give in theory to auditory images, in Surrealist poetry they are outnumbered by far by visual images. Most critics, writing about Eluard, for instance, comment on the visual quality of his imagery. In Breton's poetry, too, examples of visual "dépaysement" are far more frequent than examples of aural "dépaysement".

Behaviour pathologists occasionally encounter other varieties of hallucination: olfactory, gustatory, visceral and kinetic. In this connection one should perhaps bear in mind an observation by F. Alquié:

"Si l'image naît de notre rupture avec l'adaptation spontanée et vitale, du recul que nous pouvons prendre par rapport à l'engagement immédiat, nous ne pourrons plus, en effet, retrouver le réel à partir de l'image qu'en accusant davantage encore notre séparation première d'avec la nature, en soumettant notre désir aux lois de notre représentation. Au niveau de la pure spontanéité, et de l'instinct, on peut concevoir une action prolongeant directement l'affection. Mais précisément, à ce niveau, il n'y a pas d'images proprement dites. Les sensations dolorifiques, tactiles, olfactives, gustatives, qui expriment en nous la nature animale, ne sont en rien des images, ne peuvent même être rappelées sous forme d'images, et, de ce fait, ne sont pas sources de comportements réfléchis. Ici l'objet est contre nous, presque mêlé à notre corps; nous ne pouvons prendre aucune distance. D'où l'aspect encore affectif et vécu de telles sensations, et le caractère spontané, instinctif des réactions qui les suivent: retraits brusques de la main, inspirations, nausées. L'avènement d'une action proprement humaine est, au contraire, lié au développement des sensations auditives et visuelles. Ces sensations se prolongent aisément en images, et cela, comme l'a montré M. Pradines, parce qu'elles sont déjà des images." <sup>1</sup>

Though the distinction between "sensations" and "images" is an important one, and though visual and auditory sensations obviously play a far greater role in imagery than do the other sensations mentioned by Alquié, one occasionally has the impression that Alquié's distinc-

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1. Philosophie du surréalisme, 1970 edition, pp.182-183.

tion is perhaps a little too clear-cut, and that in poetry and painting certain images can be described as "tactile" or "olfactory", and certain tactile and olfactory sensations are in fact images, especially in view of the various new concepts of the image, including Breton's, we have considered so far. Dali's famous melting clocks are basically visual images, yet they possess, too, a tactile element; and there is an olfactory distortion, not merely an olfactory sensation, in the following line from Breton's poem, Il n'y a pas à sortir de là:

"Les cheveux des femmes ont l'odeur de la feuille d'acanthé".  
(CT 64)

Though acanthus-leaves are renowned above all for their visual appeal - these large leaves are the most characteristic ornamentation on Corinthian capitals - and though the immediate, almost instinctive reaction of the reader is to think of the beauty of their form, Breton's image is based, rather strangely, on the smell of the leaves.<sup>1</sup>

Kinaesthetic imagery is an important feature of the work of a number of poets; one thinks of the skill of Ted Hughes in conveying a sense of violent movement, for example in his poem The Hawk in the Rain, where he builds up to the climax of the bird's plummet-like swoop:

"..... and I,

..... strain towards the master-  
Fulcrum of violence where the hawk hangs still,  
That maybe in his own time meets the weather

Coming the wrong way, suffers the air, hurled upside down,  
Fall from his eye, the ponderous shires crash on him.....";

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1. In the heads carved on some capitals acanthus-leaves even replace the hair.



and earlier in this poem there is even an explicit comparison with a hallucination:

"His wings hold all creation in a weightless quiet,  
Steady as a hallucination in the streaming air...."<sup>1</sup>

Furthermore, all these kinds of hallucination, except perhaps the visceral and the kinetic, are connected with the phenomenon of synaesthesia, because they contain distortions or transfers of sense-experiences.

The account of the nature of a hallucinatory episode by Cameron and Magaret (supra, p.91) will be seen to fit particularly many of Breton's "récits de rêves". Obviously the links between the hallucination and the dream or daydream are, in any case, very close. The basic characteristic of the five dream-narrations Breton places at the beginning of Clair de Terre (CT 37-46) are, not surprisingly, those found in most dreams: there are constant switches and transformations, constantly shifting "tableaux". People and objects dart across the mental screen and disappear with equal suddenness, occasionally to make a second appearance but more commonly to be lost for ever in the mists of the subconscious.

Psychologists have discovered, of course, that the nature of dreams varies to some extent from individual to individual: in some people the dream-images are devoid of colour, in others they are full of both colour and clarity; in some people the dream-images are formed slowly, one at a time; in other people the images are formed in a very rapid series. Judging from his published "récits de rêves", Breton would belong to the final category.

Because of the similarities of form between dream-images and

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1. The Hawk in the Rain, London: Faber and Faber, 1960, p.11.

other hallucinatory images, it is virtually impossible, from a practical point of view, when one is discussing surrealist imagery, to separate the oneiric image from the image of a hallucinatory order. Because Breton does not include a separate category for oneiric images, he would presumably have felt that most of the typical ones could be described as images of a hallucinatory order.

The example of this type of image in the Manifeste is taken from Clair de Terre, but, rather curiously, it is misquoted. In the poem Au regard des divinités it is written differently:

"Sur le pont, à la même heure,  
Ainsi la rosée à tête de chatte se berçait." (CT 68)

The explanation for the misquotation may be that Breton remembers it more as a visual image than as a verbal image. It is clearly an example of a visual distortion; in the shadows of the night the dew on the bridge is fused with the head of a cat to form a half-liquid, half-solid, half-animate, half-inanimate surreal beast.

(f) The image which lends to the abstract the mask of the concrete, or vice versa.

This, too, is a type of image which occurs very frequently in Surrealist texts and poems. It is interesting, however, to recall Ezra Pound's famous advice, which he himself, of course, rarely heeded:

"Don't use such an expression as 'dim land of peace'. It dulls the image. It mixes an abstraction with the concrete. It comes from the writer's not realizing that the natural object is always the adequate symbol."<sup>1</sup>

Yet this is a fundamental surrealist image, because it brings together two traditional contraries. The interchanging of the abstract and the concrete brings them to the same level. The focusing-

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1. A Few Don'ts By an Imagiste, in Poetry, March 1913; reprinted in Jones, P. (ed.), Imagist Poetry, p.131.

screen, the concrete element in the Aragon sentence Breton takes as an example, is an ideal agent for the fusion of the abstract and the concrete:

"Un peu à gauche, dans son firmament deviné, j'aperçois - mais sans doute n'est-ce qu'une vapeur de sang et de meurtre - le brillant dépoli des perturbations de la liberté."

The fusion of steam and murder is a further example thrown in for good measure, though one could perhaps see the vaporisation of the blood as a movement towards the abstract from the concrete (or rather the liquid).

Images lending the mask of the concrete to the abstract, or vice versa, were by no means the discovery of the Surrealists, of course. The association in a metaphor of the abstract and the concrete must be as old as imagery itself. Hugo was particularly fond of such images, and they were, significantly, very common in the verse of the Symbolists.

The major difference between such images as they were employed by the Symbolists, and the abstract/concrete images in Surrealist poetry is hinted at by Anna Balakian:

"But although the Symbolists all took the same inward direction toward the exploration of a new image, the result in the case of most of them was that the associations between the concrete and the abstract were so logical and followed such an orderly construction that the abstract merely became the symbol of the concrete, and a new reality was not suggested. The images gathered in the limitless landscapes that they sensed were clothed with the very limitations they were trying to forestall." <sup>1</sup>

These limitations, at least, are not to be found in most abstract/concrete images in Surrealist poetry. The desire to bring together totally disparate entities is usually fulfilled, so that the abstract term rarely becomes a mere symbol of the concrete, or vice

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1. Literary Origins of Surrealism, p.111.



versa. The surrealist image merging the abstract and the concrete differs from the traditional abstract/concrete metaphor in its apparent irrational or inexplicable juxtaposition of terms. It is a category of hallucinatory image that behaviour pathologists do not appear to have encountered in their investigations.

An idea from Freud's theory of dreams may indicate how the abstract and concrete are merged in the Surrealists' "récits de rêves"; it concerns the repressed impulse in the dream text:

"Just like any other impulse this one presses forward towards satisfaction in action, but the path to motor discharge is closed to it on account of the physiological characteristics of the state of sleep, and so it is forced to travel in the retrograde direction to perception, and content itself with an hallucinatory satisfaction. The latent dream-thoughts are therefore turned into a collection of sensory images and visual scenes. As they are travelling in this direction something happens to them which seems to us new and bewildering. All the verbal apparatus by means of which the more subtle thought relations are expressed, the conjunctions and prepositions, the variations of declension and conjugation, are lacking, because the means of portraying them are absent: just as in primitive grammarless speech, only the raw materials of thought can be expressed, and the abstract is merged again in the concrete from which it sprang." <sup>1</sup>

In dreams the abstract can be merged in the concrete and also the abstract may be represented by the concrete. Given the importance of oneiric imagery in Surrealist poetry,<sup>2</sup> the frequency of abstract/concrete images may be in some measure due to this.<sup>3</sup>

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1. Freud, S., Revision of the Theory of Dreams (New Introductory Lectures, 1933, ch.I), quoted by Read, H., Surrealism, London: Faber, 1936, pp.67-8.
  2. Soupault claims in his tribute to Breton in André Breton et le mouvement surréaliste (p.664): "Tous ses poèmes sont, en quelque sorte, inspirés et dominés par des souvenirs oniriques." This may be an exaggeration, but it is more likely to be true of the poems written by Breton when Soupault was accepted as a member of the Surrealist group than of those written in the latter part of Breton's career.
  3. Anna Balakian goes so far as to claim that half the images in Surrealist poetry fall into this category. v. Surrealism: the Road to the Absolute, 1959 edition, p.115.

Occasionally Breton tries to bring together in a metaphor two abstract terms, despite the claim of Professor S. Ullmann, for instance, that this does not constitute an image:

"Une comparaison entre deux phénomènes abstraits, pour juste et pénétrante qu'elle soit, ne constitue point une image, à moins que l'un ou l'autre des termes ne soit concrétisé." <sup>1</sup>

Admittedly, one can usually find some potentially concretising agent in Breton's abstract/abstract images, as is the case with the opening line of Il n'y a pas à sortir de là:

"Liberté couleur d'homme". (CT 63)

Apparently the two abstract nouns, "liberté" and "couleur" are the two terms of this metaphor, but in fact the concrete noun "homme" has some contagious effect on the abstract noun "couleur" it qualifies. In any case, the two abstract nouns are not disparate, for the colours of certain flags and emblems have long-standing associations with the concept of freedom.

(g) The image which implies the negation of some elementary physical property.

Whereas the image of apparent contradiction constitutes an attack on reason and logic as well as on reality, the image which negates an elementary physical property is more obviously the result of a refusal to be content with the "real" world. The negation of some elementary physical property could contain an element of contradiction, or could indeed be based on contradiction, and consequently comes very close to type (a). It is a surrealist image because it contains within itself a fusion of reality and its opposite. As with

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1. Ullmann, S., L'image littéraire: quelques questions de méthode, Actes du VIII<sup>e</sup> Congrès de la Fédération Internationale des Langues et Littératures modernes, Université de Liège, 1961, p.43.

other types of surrealist images, the negation of an elementary physical property does not occur for the first time in Surrealist poetry. Odd examples are to be found throughout the history of literature. However, the motives behind the use of such images by writers in previous centuries are usually far different from those present in the minds of the Surrealist poets, and these images occur much more frequently in Surrealist texts than in the writings of earlier generations of poets.

In the couple of lines by Roger Vitrac chosen by Breton as an illustration of this type of image, it may seem absurd that the lions could be cool in a burnt down forest, because the natural reaction of the reader is to imagine the flames, whereas the force of the past participle in fact could place the time of the fire well into the past.

Breton could have chosen a better example; in Le Mouvement perpétuel (1920-1924) Aragon included the following short poem, Isabelle:

"J'aime une herbe blanche ou plutôt  
Une hermine aux pieds de silence  
C'est le soleil qui se balance  
Et c'est Isabelle au manteau  
Couleur de lait et d'insolence." <sup>1</sup>

Here Aragon apparently merely changes the colour of grass from green to white. Such colour changes are among the most common features of this category of surrealist image. It does almost inevitably involve some form of "dépaysement", some modification of "reality", as the idea of "the negation of some elementary physical property" clearly implies.

The image of "une herbe blanche" has a hallucinatory quality,

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1. op.cit., Paris:Gallimard (Coll. 'Poésie'), 1970, p.68.



and there is the impression of a metamorphosis, suggesting that the poem may be of oneiric inspiration. Yet the phrase could simply refer to some plant or weed that is basically white in colour and Aragon uses this as an image of the girl.

One could also place in this category images in which there is a defiance of the laws of gravity (e.g. objects inexplicably suspended in mid-air), the abolition or modification of the properties of elements and the erosion of the barriers between animal, vegetable and mineral, a number of examples of which will be discussed in due course. Naturally, certain of these could be regarded, too, as images of a hallucinatory order. Once again one sees that the boundaries between the categories in Breton's list are very elastic.

(h) The image which raises a laugh.

It may be argued, of course, that this category should include all surrealist images, though such an argument would be somewhat frivolous. It is certainly very close to type (d). Presumably Breton intended this final category to include humorous images which cannot be accommodated elsewhere in his classification and wished this category to include those images whose main quality is their humour, but where the humour is not of the purely formal, purely verbal nature of images in type (d).

The example by Max Morise, with which Breton illustrates this type of image, amounts to little more than a wisecrack. It does not belong to any of the previous categories. It may appear to be a surrealist image only because Breton, and other members of the Surrealist group, wish it to be. Breton, however, tries to relate the question of "l'humour" to the Surrealist dialectic system

in Situation surréaliste de l'objet, where he is discussing Jarry, in whom he declares

"..... se livre et prend brusquement un tour décisif le combat entre les deux forces qui, tour à tour, ont tendu à se soumettre l'art à l'époque romantique: celle qui entraînait l'intérêt à se fixer sur les accidents du monde extérieur, d'une part, et, d'autre part, celle qui l'entraînait à se fixer sur les caprices de la personnalité. La pénétration intime de ces deux tendances, qui gardent un caractère relativement alternatif chez Lautréamont, aboutit chez Jarry au triomphe de l'humour objectif qui en est la résolution dialectique." (M 281)

The Surrealists do set great store by humour of all kinds.

Humour was part of the legacy of Lautréamont, Jarry and Vaché on the one hand and of Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll on the other. It corresponds also to the natural disposition and attitudes of most of the Surrealists. Humour is never absent for long from Breton's automatic texts. It has never been made sufficiently clear, however, that although Breton extols "humour noir", in his own poetry the humour could often be more aptly called "humour rose".<sup>1</sup>

In Text 17 of Poisson soluble Breton talks about one of those musical instruments known as "brushes"! He develops this notion, and then, with a touch of bathos, teases the reader and creates for himself a way of escape:

"Il y a plusieurs sortes de brosses, parmi lesquelles je citerai pour être incomplet la brosse à cheveux et la brosse à reluire. Il y a aussi le soleil et le gant de crin mais ce ne sont pas des brosses à proprement parler." (M 86)

The Surrealists also saw humour as an important aspect of the attitude of revolt which is at the heart of their movement. In Breton's preface to his Anthologie de l'humour noir he lavishes praise on Léon-Pierre Quint's study, Le Comte de Lautréamont et Dieu, on the grounds that it

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1. Breton, in fact, asks himself the question, but with reference to Lewis Carroll: "Humour rose? Humour noir?...." (HN 16).

"..... présente l'humour comme une manière d'affirmer, par delà 'la révolte absolue de l'adolescence et la révolte de l'âge adulte', la révolte supérieure de l'esprit." (HN 16)

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This list, though useful as a starting-point, does not really take one very far. Breton gives no indication of the relative frequency or importance of each of these categories; he does not comment on the particular role each type of image plays in the creation of the Surrealist poetic universe or how each type fits into the overall pattern. It is clear that not all the categories really bring together distant realities, though this criterion is present in the ones which are found more frequently in Surrealist texts. This thesis sets out to attempt to provide some of the answers to these problems, not by the compilation of more systematic, more exhaustive lists, but by commentary on Breton's recueils and by the analysis of individual poems. The important, and interesting, qualities of Breton's imagery are probably not in fact those mentioned in his list; they will be found in Breton's power to generate surprise, in his exploration of ambiguity and polyvalency and of the blend of obscurity and clarity, in his exploitation of phonic resemblances, in his evocation of an emotion, a sensation, and especially an intuition, by means of very personal symbolism.

Though Breton's list provides the critic with a few useful terms, it is a long way from being sufficient, and as will be seen in this thesis, if one attempts to rely solely on Breton's categories in one's analysis and commentary on his poetry, one soon finds that one is repeating oneself and it is not possible to convey the real secrets either of the nature and function of the imagery in Breton's poetry or of the structure of the poems. One of the main purposes



of the present study is thus to attempt to demonstrate that although the role of the imagery is perhaps more important in Breton's poetry than in the work of any other poet of comparable stature, what Breton has to say about the image, however often his famous remarks in the Manifeste may have been quoted, gives little real indication of the nature, function and importance of the images in his poetry. Certain of the categories, e.g. the image of a hallucinatory order, the negation of an elementary physical property, are clearly more important than others and correspond more closely than, for example, the image with an absent term, to what the public understands by the term "surrealist", though if the category, the image with an absent term, was intended to cover the symbol, it does play a major role in the network of Breton's images.

On the other hand, it has been seen that a number of Breton's categories are, in fact, either age-old features of poetry or new expressions for describing fairly common devices. In any case, frontiers between certain basic kinds of imagery have long been blurred: poets and critics in the nineteenth century, Baudelaire among others, did not make completely consistent distinctions between symbol, sign, emblem, allegory, image. It will be seen that where surrealist imagery does differ from imagery of much earlier poetry is in its density. This profusion of images, of metaphors, is largely responsible for the impression one has that Breton's poetry revolves around fleeting perceptions.

Nonetheless, the list of types of surrealist images in the Manifeste gives sufficient indication of Breton's general conception of the image.

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To complete the initial discussion of Breton's statements on the image in the Manifeste du Surréalisme, we propose to show how they fit into the context of the final pages of the book and of its major themes.

After presenting his classification of types of surrealist images, Breton maintains that he is convinced that surrealist images satisfy certain demands of the human mind which are not met in the ordinary course of events, and to demonstrate this point he selects a particularly apt and obvious example:

"L'esprit qui plonge dans le surréalisme revit avec exaltation la meilleure part de son enfance." (M 48)

Breton here gets to the heart of one of the great virtues of Surrealism, but also, at one and the same time, one of its potential weaknesses. Breton himself had a childlike fascination with the wonders of language, a childlike awareness of language. One would, of course, be surprised to encounter a poet who did not marvel at his medium, yet at times with Breton, as with other Surrealists, Desnos above all, this fascination was often on the point of becoming a rather puerile pleasure. One often feels that the Surrealists spent too much time indulging in games and experiments which, though they may be the source and the essence of poetry, nevertheless became a little childish if tried for too long. Breton, however, had a ready answer to such accusations:

"Des souvenirs d'enfance et de quelques autres se dégage un sentiment d'inaccaparé et par la suite de dévoyé que je tiens pour le plus fécond qui existe. C'est peut-être l'enfance qui approche le plus de la 'vraie vie'!" (M48)

Breton felt that Surrealism could help to restore to men this lost paradise of childhood, and this will remain a fundamental tenet and theme of the movement. One is reminded here of what Baudelaire wrote on the matter:

"L'enfant voit tout en nouveauté; il est toujours ivre."<sup>1</sup>

On one or two occasions in these final pages of the Manifeste one sees that, when it comes to essentials such as the question of poetic vision, Breton and Baudelaire have much in common. Moreover, as we shall see in the next chapter, it is with reference to word-play that Breton first mentions Rimbaud's concept of "l'alchimie du verbe".

Breton was prepared at the outset to accept that Surrealism would change; he was aware that its possibilities had by no means been exhausted by 1924. He was fully conscious of this and welcomed future developments:

"Les moyens surréalistes demanderaient, d'ailleurs, à être étendus. Tout est bon pour obtenir de certaines associations la soudaineté désirable." (M 49)

Breton mentions the "papiers collés" of Picasso and Braque, and suggests that their technique could with some justification be applied to poetry:

"Il est même permis d'intituler POÈME ce qu'on obtient par l'assemblage aussi gratuit que possible (observons, si vous voulez, la syntaxe) de titres et de fragments de titres découpés dans les journaux..." (*ibid.*)

This "collage" poetry had been introduced during the Dada period, and the poem Le Corset mystère at the end of Mont de Piété is an obvious example of it. The example in the Manifeste, however, (M 50-52) attracts the reader first of all by its lay-out, by its different kinds of type: it is pleasing to the eye. Yet, as one reads it, one soon detects that its appeal is not purely visual: the alliteration, assonance and internal rhyme in the opening image are conventional devices, the effect of which is to make the reader

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1. Baudelaire, C., O.C. (ed. J. Crépet), L'Art Romantique, Paris: Conard, 1925, p.59.



feel at home, so to speak, to make him feel that this is, in fact, the beginning of a poem:

" Un éclat de rire  
de saphir dans l'île de Ceylan."

This "colour-hearing" is possibly reinforced by the presence of a third sense-impression, the tactile, in the mention of the sapphire. When the colour of the stone is taken in conjunction with the following phrase - which could be regarded as a separate hemistich -, it suggests the blue skies of Ceylon, and the blue waters which make it an island. As the poem continues, one sees further instances of conventional poetic devices and figures at work: the alliteration (and a little assonance, too) in

" Une voie carrossable  
vous conduit au bord de l'inconnu",

the hint of word-play (or of words "making love") in

" S'aggrave  
l'agréable."

Moreover, there are one or two examples of surrealist images: there is the Rose Sélavy type humour in the negative statement,

" une paire  
de bas de soie  
n'est pas  
Un saut dans le vide  
UN CERF",

and clearly an element of surprise, if not quite apparent contradiction, in the cutting,

"PARIS EST UN GRAND VILLAGE",

which prefigures the famous line in Tournesol,

"Une ferme prospérait en plein Paris". (CT 86)

Similarly, the phrase, "AU BAL DES ARDENTS", heralds the allusion to the fatal fancy-dress ball at the end of Fata Morgana. (SA 49)

This "collage poem", existing in a twilight zone between

literature and art, suggests that Breton in 1924 was still considering means of extending the frontiers of poetry. During the final pages of the Manifeste, however, he seems curiously apathetic and indifferent to a question which is, after all, of considerable interest for Surrealism:

"Je me hâte d'ajouter que les futures techniques surréalistes ne m'intéressent pas." (M 52)

It may well be, quite simply, that Breton was content in the knowledge that he had discovered his technique and his style. Almost all the poems he wrote subsequently were dominated to a greater or lesser degree by the arbitrary images he had placed at the centre of his poetics.

Breton does consider certain possible applications of Surrealism, including prophecy, though at this stage he is rather dubious:

"Certes, je ne crois pas à la vertu prophétique de la parole surréaliste." (M 53)

At a later date Breton felt compelled to modify this view; the famous "nuit du Tournesol" episode described in L'Amour fou led him to believe that certain Surrealist texts and poems may appear to predict future events. Even in the Manifeste, however, Breton claims that he sees a connection between the Surrealist voice and the great oracles of antiquity:

"La voix surréaliste qui secouait Cumes, Dodone et Delphes n'est autre chose que celle qui me dicte mes discours les moins courroucés." (*ibid.*)

He does not bring forward any evidence to substantiate this claim, which is reminiscent of Rimbaud's words in the Saison en Enfer, "C'est oracle ce que je dis." It is difficult to decide whether he is trying to make a serious point about either the nature of the Surrealist voice and/or the nature of the pronouncements of the

oracles, or whether he is simply being wilfully provocative. The final words of the Manifeste are without doubt provocatively enigmatic, as Breton evokes and illustrates the significance and the nature of Surrealism:

"Le surréalisme est le 'rayon invisible' qui nous permettra un jour de l'emporter sur nos adversaires. 'Tu ne trembles plus, carcasse.' Cet été les roses sont bleues; le bois c'est du verre. La terre drapée dans sa verdure me fait aussi peu d'effet qu'un revenant. C'est vivre et cesser de vivre qui sont des solutions imaginaires. L'existence est ailleurs." (M 55)

So with these final sentences of the Manifeste Breton leaves the reader with a few challenging remarks as well as a few of the strange images which have been the subject of some of the most important pages of the text, after the initial allusion to the invisible ray, which, superficially, is a dip into science-fiction, but which, more profoundly, brings back the theme of mysterious light, perhaps the light of deeper vision and greater insight.

Although the Manifeste is probably concerned primarily with Surrealist poetics, it introduces one or two of the major themes of the Surrealists, which will appear as leitmotive in their works and in this study. When, at the beginning of the book, Breton is discussing the need to give greater scope to the imagination, he relates this question to that of freedom:

"Le seul mot de liberté est tout ce qui m'exalte encore. Je le crois propre à entretenir, indéfiniment, le vieux fanatisme humain. Il répond sans doute à ma seule aspiration légitime. Parmi tant de disgrâces dont nous héritons, il faut bien reconnaître que la plus grande liberté d'esprit nous est laissée." (M 16)

The Surrealists were to fight for freedom in every domain: political, moral, social, sexual. The principle of freedom was extended, of course, to the area of imagery, where everything becomes possible once the criterion of arbitrariness has been established.



Likewise Breton uses the Manifeste to champion the cause of "le merveilleux":

"Pour cette fois, mon intention était de faire justice de la haine du merveilleux qui sévit chez certains hommes, de ce ridicule sous lequel ils veulent le faire tomber. Tranchons-en: le merveilleux est toujours beau, n'importe quel merveilleux est beau, il n'y a même que le merveilleux qui soit beau." (M 25)

Breton relates the question of "le merveilleux" explicitly to literature. He claims that it alone could redeem the novel, citing as an example of a novel where this has occurred Ambrosio, or the Monk, by M.C. Lewis. "Le merveilleux" is one of the prime elements of the Gothic novel, the sole kind of novel for which Breton expresses any partiality. Aragon's novel, Le Paysan de Paris (1926), will be a panegyric to "le merveilleux moderne", and the heroine in Breton's Nadja (1928), which is almost a new type of novel, will be a personification of its incursion into everyday existence.

Breton observes that the symbols of "le merveilleux" vary from age to age: he refers to the Romantic penchant for ruins and to the more modern motif of the tailor's dummy, a motif one encounters frequently in the works of Apollinaire, Chirico and Buñuel.

Symbols of "le merveilleux" vary, too, from Surrealist to Surrealist. For Eluard, this theme is almost invariably connected in some way with the themes of love and woman. For Aragon, the city of Paris is the chief source of wonder. For Breton, certain quarters of the capital, Gothic castles, crystals, unusual objects in curiosity shops, the captivating eyes of a woman, all have their parts to play in the theatre of "le merveilleux".

It may well be, however, that the significance of the Manifeste resides not so much on the surface, in its classification of surrealist images and in its comments on some of the main themes

of Surrealism, as in its latent pointers to the way in which language can be made to express and evoke this quality of "le merveilleux". Undoubtedly for Breton his discovery of automatic writing and its role in the creation of lyrical surges, of "sudden lifts", to use T.E. Hulme's phrase, of "dépassements spasmodiques de l'expression contrôlée", was crucial in this respect; and from time to time in the Manifeste, ostensibly a theoretical work, one finds hints of such surges. Their spirit is evoked in Breton's expression of a conviction which will become what one might call his characteristic gesture: his indefatigable pursuit of his aims, against all the odds:

"Je crois, dans ce domaine comme dans un autre, à la joie surréaliste pure de l'homme qui, averti de l'échec successif de tous les autres, ne se tient pas pour battu, part d'où il veut et par tout autre chemin qu'un chemin raisonnable, parvient où il peut." (M 54)

Though Breton, in this context, is speaking of those he considers to be "vrais savants", the words are just as applicable to the alchemist and the poet as to the scientist, just as valid for the experimenter with language as for the experimenter with mice. This spirit is translated into words on the very first page, as Breton evokes the imagination of children, not yet tamed by reason and logic:

"Là, l'absence de toute rigueur connue lui laisse la perspective de plusieurs vies menées à la fois; il s'enracine dans cette illusion; il ne veut plus connaître que la facilité momentanée, extrême, de toutes choses. Chaque matin, des enfants partent sans inquiétude. Tout est près, les pires conditions matérielles sont excellentes. Les bois sont blancs ou noirs, on ne dormira jamais."

Theory is wedded to practice; in the mind of the child (or the Surrealist) contraries lose their quality of contraries, conventional notions of time and space cease to apply; and the "sudden lifts" are

evoked by the awareness of the "facilité momentanée, extrême, de toutes choses". These surges help to prepare the reader for the texts of Poisson soluble which followed the Manifeste in its first edition.

The first Manifeste du Surréalisme is possibly Breton's most important work, at least as far as its influence is concerned, for it is here that Breton lay the theoretical foundations of the Surrealist movement, as he traced the important discoveries he and his friends had made in the previous five years or so, explained how these discoveries came to take place, examined them in some detail, and suggested their possible consequences and developments. He broke down old-established barriers, pointed to the creation of a new kind of reality and suggested a new way of looking at things. He stressed the importance of the subconscious mind, revived the dream as a source and method of discovery and knowledge, formulated a new aesthetic standard ("le merveilleux") while at the same time formally decrying aesthetics, and revealed a new method of writing poetry, the basis of which is the arbitrary image, even though Breton's rather hasty classification of types of arbitrary, surrealist images may leave a lot to be desired. As was seen in the previous chapter, one has to recognize that it is exceedingly difficult to formulate totally convincingly new concepts of the image; the fundamentals of poetic perception and imagination do not change radically from age to age, even though styles of poetic diction may undergo drastic modifications; one may have to conclude that when a poet attempts to explain his secrets in terms of a few formulae, he inevitably reveals just the most basic facts and features, though his poetic universe may be extremely complex and his poems may



explore the most subtle of analogies by an almost infinite variety of means.

Despite the fact that the notion of bringing together "distant realities" in an image was a fairly widely held belief among poets and thinkers at the time, it is Breton, in the Manifeste, who commits himself to draw up the first list of types of surrealist images, however provisional, incomplete and unsatisfactory it may be, and who states categorically that the most powerful images are, for him, the most arbitrary ones, images produced by automatic writing when the poet is in a state of receptivity.

The true value of the first Manifeste is probably to be found, however, in its more general revelation of Breton's ideas on the language of poetry and on poetic composition: his investigations into the source, nature and function of lyricism, his desire to give even more freedom to the imagination, his championing of "le merveilleux".

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To complete the examination of Breton's initial theory of the image, two further texts, written at roughly the same period, must be considered, the essay Les mots sans rides and the Introduction au discours sur le peu de réalité.

# CHAPTER FOUR

## "LES MOTS SANS RIDES" AND THE "INTRODUCTION AU DISCOURS SUR LE PEU DE RÉALITÉ."

It is not immediately apparent whether the essay Les mots sans rides (1922) relates more to Breton's pre-surrealist poetics, the poetics lying behind some of the poems in Mont de Piété, or to Surrealism.

The basic ideas of Les mots sans rides are revealed by the opening sentences:

"On commençait à se défier des mots, on venait tout à coup de s'apercevoir qu'ils demandaient à être traités autrement que ses petits auxiliaires pour lesquels on les avait toujours pris; certains pensaient qu'à force de servir ils s'étaient beaucoup affinés, d'autres que, par essence, ils pouvaient légitimement aspirer à une condition autre que la leur, bref, il était question de les affranchir. A l'Alchimie du verbe' avait succédé une véritable chimie qui tout d'abord s'était employée à dégager les propriétés de ces mots dont une seule, le sens, spécifiée par le dictionnaire: Il s'agissait: 1. de considérer le mot en soi; 2. d'étudier d'aussi près que possible les réactions des mots les uns sur les autres. Ce n'est qu'à ce prix qu'on pourrait espérer rendre au langage sa destination pleine, ce qui, pour quelques-uns dont j'étais, devait faire faire un grand pas à la connaissance, exalter d'autant la vie." (PP 167)

The implications of these few sentences are, of course, considerable. Whether or not they were written with Surrealist techniques in mind, when they are explored and put into practice, they help to revolutionize not only Breton's attitude to poetry, but also the attitude of a whole generation of poets.

Breton had realized, if only intuitively, that there is more to words than the definition of their meaning in dictionaries. In Les mots sans rides Breton translates this vague intuition into a more positive statement. By replacing briefly Rimbaud's concept of the alchemy of the word with his own concept of verbal chemistry,

Breton gives himself the opportunity to examine the other basic properties of the word, in addition to their meaning.

As will be seen in Part III, some of the poems in Breton's first recueil Mont de Piété had relied considerably on homonymy, typographical arrangements and various forms of word-play.

Breton in Les mots sans rides stresses the historical importance of Rimbaud's sonnet Voyelles in connection with the ideas expressed in the essay (cf. *supra*, p.31) and sees this poem as a key to the new lyricism he sought for poetry.

At the heart of this new lyricism is what Breton now refers to as "l'allure des mots", as opposed to their meaning. Indeed, the new lyricism may be born of the obvious conflict between these two aspects of words:

"En effet l'expression d'une idée dépend autant de l'allure des mots que de leur sens. Il est des mots qui travaillent contre l'idée qu'ils prétendent exprimer. Enfin même le sens des mots ne va pas sans mélange et l'on n'est pas près de déterminer dans quelle mesure le sens figuré agit progressivement sur le sens propre, à chaque variation de celui-ci devant correspondre une variation de celui-là." (PP 169)

I.A. Richards, too, has written of this interaction of words. In his lecture entitled "Some criteria of words" he made the following observation:

"Towards the end of the last lecture I was suggesting that our words commonly take meaning through the influence of other words which we may never think of but which in the back of the mind co-operate in controlling them. And I concluded with the remark that a great writer often gains his aim by making a single phrase pull with or against large ranges of the language." <sup>1</sup>

Breton was convinced that for the first time poets were prepared to accept that words do have an independent existence, that

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1. Richards, I.A., The Philosophy of Rhetoric, New York: Oxford University Press, 1936, p.75.



words can take the initiative and influence thought.

Breton is here expressing the idea which is very reminiscent of a basic idea of occultism, as Enid Starkie's consideration of the influence of Eliphas Lévi on Rimbaud reveals:

"In the writings of all occult philosophers great stress is laid on the importance of words in themselves, through their sound, their very essence, independently of their logical meaning. .... For occult thinkers there is a mysterious symbolism contained in the word itself, often in the separate letters of the word, and a secret meaning in each number." <sup>1</sup>

A recent study of Rimbaud by Jean Richer<sup>2</sup> contains fascinating exegeses based on such links between sounds, letters, numbers and themes, and explains the concept of "l'alchimie du verbe" with reference to them.

Breton cites the experiments of Paulhan, Eluard and Picabia, the work of Lautréamont, Mallarmé's Un Coup de Dés, La Victoire and certain of Apollinaire's "calligrammes" and then goes on to discuss six "jeux de mots" signed Rose Sélavy (cf. supra; p.72) He feels they are examples which clearly bear out his theory:

"... d'une part leur rigueur mathématique (déplacement de lettre à l'intérieur d'un mot, échange de syllabe entre deux mots, etc.), d'autre part l'élément comique qui passait pour inhérent au genre et suffisait à sa dépréciation. C'était, à mon sens, ce qui depuis longtemps s'était produit de plus remarquable en poésie." (PP 170)

Breton does not quote an example of these "jeux de mots" but discusses instead the connection between their author, Marcel Duchamp, and Desnos, who, in a state of trance uttered similar phrases supposedly at the dictation of Rose Sélavy/Duchamp. All the 150 sentences of the "recueil" Rose Sélavy by Desnos could be considered as examples, however,<sup>3</sup> or the examples from the pen of Duchamp

1. Arthur Rimbaud, p.110.

2. L'Alchimie du verbe de Rimbaud, Paris: Didier, 1972.

3. Published in Desnos, R., Corps et Biens, Paris: Gallimard (Coll. 'Poésie'), 1968, pp.31-46.

published in Georges Hugnet's L'aventure Dada, of which the first two run as follows:

"Rose Sélavy trouve qu'un incesticide doit coucher avec sa mère avant de la tuer; les punaises sont de rigueur.

Rose Sélavy et moi esquivons les ecchymoses des Esquimaux aux mots exquis." <sup>1</sup>

There is a reconciliation here by Duchamp of a naive, unconscious use of paronomasia and intelligent, conscious verbal creation ("incesticide"), but one is left with the impression that the words of the phrases themselves suggest and dictate to the author what must come next.

Breton, significantly, sees these examples not just in terms of words and meaning but in relation to poetry. He is a poet and cannot forget for long his prime concern with the creation of a new kind of poetry. Consequently, he cannot dismiss the "calembours de Rose Sélavy" as mere "jeux de mots". This is why Les mots sans rides ends with the alluring observation, "Les mots font l'amour". (cf. *supra*, p.72).

Mallarmé, of course, had been particularly fascinated by the manifold qualities of words. He saw words as living beings; <sup>2</sup> in Les Mots Anglais he went so far as to suggest that letters have meaning and value in themselves as elements of pure sound; he saw importance in the punctuation marks; by careful disruption of the word-order he would throw words into new relationships; he said that "les milliers de mots d'une langue sont apparentés entre eux", <sup>3</sup>

1. *op.cit.*, Paris: Seghers, 1971, pp.158-159.

2. "Le mot présente, dans ses voyelles et ses diphthongues, comme une chair; et dans ses consonnes, comme une ossature délicate à disséquer." (Les Mots Anglais, O.C., Paris: Gallimard [Coll. 'Pléiade'], 1945, p.901). Hugo, too, had a similar conception of the word.

3. Mallarmé, S., O.C., p.963.

and that "tous (les mots) ont plus ou moins, peut-être, un lien de parenté vague qui les unit."<sup>1</sup> Given that Breton's first poems are Mallarméan in style, it is not surprising that in one of his earliest theoretical texts there is a clear connection with certain of Mallarmé's ideas, but though one can very easily relate the poems of Mont de Piété and the even earlier "inédits" to the ideas expressed in Les mots sans rides, the import of the essay is so general that it is equally valid as far as Breton's Surrealist style is concerned. Even though Breton does not discuss imagery explicitly in Les mots sans rides - the word "image" is found there just once, and then only in the sense of "example" - the ideas discussed in this essay have an obvious bearing on the whole question of the image and form an important complement to the ideas on the image presented in the Manifeste du Surréalisme.

The second text, the Introduction au discours sur le peu de réalité,<sup>2</sup> was written in September 1924, i.e. a month before the Manifeste du Surréalisme appeared on the bookstalls.

The problem of reality had been one of the points of departure for the Manifeste, and it is clearly a problem which obsessed Breton in the 1920's and early 1930's. It is discussed at length in Nadja, it is crucial to Les Vases communicants and is fundamental to the Introduction au discours sur le peu de réalité. The earlier part of this last text continues the undermining of our notions of reality, for example the dubious validity of certain sense-perceptions, even though these are, of course, vital for a poet, and Breton perhaps more than most; but of more immediate relevance for the present

1. Mallarmé, S., O.C., p.918.

2. In Commerce, 3 (hiver 1924), pp.25-57; reprinted in Point du Jour.



study, however, are certain comments he makes about the properties of words, which seem to follow on naturally from the ideas expressed in Les mots sans rides:

"Les mots sont sujets à se grouper selon des affinités particulières, lesquelles ont généralement pour effet de leur faire recréer à chaque instant le monde sur son vieux modèle. Tout se passe alors comme si une réalité concrète existait en dehors de l'individuel; que dis-je, comme si cette réalité était immuable....."

Mais je l'ai déjà dit, les mots, de par la nature que nous leur reconnaissons, méritent de jouer un rôle autrement décisif. Rien ne sert de les modifier puisque, tels qu'ils sont, ils répondent avec cette promptitude à notre appel. Il suffit que notre critique porte sur les lois qui président à leur assemblage. La médiocrité de notre univers ne dépend-elle pas essentiellement de notre pouvoir d'énonciation? La poésie, dans ses plus mortes saisons, nous en a souvent fourni la preuve: quelle débauche de ciels étoilés, de pierres précieuses, de feuilles mortes. Dieu merci, une réaction lente mais sûre a fini par s'opérer à ce sujet dans les esprits. .... Qu'est-ce qui me retient de brouiller l'ordre des mots, d'attenter de cette manière à l'existence toute apparente des choses! Le langage peut et doit être arraché à son servage....." (PJ 21-23)

With these final remarks the Introduction au discours sur le peu de réalité makes the link between Les mots sans rides and the Manifeste: Breton's profound desire to liberate words, to liberate language. He goes on to pour scorn on the notion that communication and comprehension are the sole purposes of language, and then makes the important claim, in spite of his reference to "brouiller l'ordre des mots", that he naturally observes the rules and requirements of syntax, "la syntaxe qui n'est pas, comme le croient certains sots, une discipline". (PJ 23).

Certainly, for the most part, Breton does not seek to break free from grammatical rules and conventions. For him they are not impediments. His prose-style may be at times rhetorical, at times complex or even convoluted - Breton enjoys the long sentence containing a series of clauses and parentheses -, he may have evolved a rich and sonorous "vers libre"; but in his liberation of language he

rarely has to resort to such an obvious device as its total dislocation, except, for instance, when he and Eluard are simulating the language of a schizophrenic in L'Immaculée Conception, or when he records in his poems and automatic texts the occasional cryptic formula, image, or juxtaposition of words, e.g. "Coeur lettre de cachet", the last line of Le Buvard de Cendre (CT 66). Yet despite all of this, one suspects that there is more to the question of syntax in Breton's poetry than he was prepared to admit. The explanation is probably the general one put forward by Donald Davie:

"By exploiting to the full an articulation analogous to that of dreams, the poet can make the articulations of syntax, even while their forms are retained, no more than a phantasmal play on the surface of his poem. Then the true articulation takes place by magical or dream-like associations of one image with another: a word in one sentence reaches out to embrace another two sentences away, and the relationship thus established makes the relation of each word to the others in its sentence thin and illusory." <sup>1</sup>

There is at work an unseen, highly sophisticated erosion of syntax, similar to Breton's undermining of semantic values, despite his use of the "mot juste".

The next highly significant point Breton makes concerns in fact the notion of the "meaning" of images:

"Il s'est trouvé quelqu'un d'assez malhonnête pour dresser un jour, dans une notice d'anthologie, la table de quelques-unes des images que nous présente l'oeuvre d'un des plus grand poètes vivants:

Lendemain de chenille en tenue de bal veut dire: papillon.

Mamelle de cristal veut dire: une carafe.

Etc. Non, monsieur, ne veut pas dire. Rentrez votre papillon dans votre carafe. Ce que Saint-Pol-Roux a voulu dire, soyez certain qu'il l'a dit." (PJ 23)

Of course, line 3 of the poem by Saint-Pol-Roux, La carafe d'eau pure runs,

"La mamelle de cristal, seule, affirme la merveille de son eau candide",

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1. Articulate Energy, p.11.

but what Breton is attacking is the notion that one must automatically seek to "explain" a metaphor in rational terms in the way Remy de Gourmont had done in his chapter on Saint-Pol-Roux in Le Livre des Masques.<sup>1</sup> Breton wants the "reality" of such images to be recognized in its own right. He wants them to receive as much credit as that given to travellers' tales:

"Les créations poétiques sont-elles appelées à prendre bientôt ce caractère tangible, à déplacer si singulièrement les bornes du soi-disant réel? Il est désirable que le pouvoir hallucinatoire de certaines images, que le véritable don d'évocation que possèdent indépendamment de la faculté de se souvenir, certains hommes, ne soient pas plus longtemps méconnus." (PJ 25)

By this time Breton, like other youngish men of the day, including T.S. Eliot and Oswald Spengler, the author in 1918 of Untergang des Abendlandes, has come to despair of Western civilisation; Breton is irritated particularly by its narrow conception of reality, its reason and logic, and so at the end of the essay he chooses to pin his faith on the East:

"Orient, Orient, vainqueur, toi qui n'as qu'une valeur de symbole, dispose de moi, Orient de colère et de perles! Aussi bien que dans la coulée d'une phrase, que dans le vent mystérieux d'un jazz, accorde-moi de reconnaître tes moyens dans les prochaines Révolutions. Toi qui es l'image rayonnante de ma dépossession, Orient, bel oiseau de proie et d'innocence, je t'implore du fond du royaume des ombres! Inspire-moi, que je sois celui qui n'a plus d'ombre." (PJ 28-29)

This lyrical invocation paves the way not only for the lyrical prose of a number of Breton's later works but also for the interest he will take, not so much in the myths of Asia, but in the myths of primitive peoples, American Indians and South Sea Islanders. The essay, as a whole, however, ties in with the main ideas both of the Manifeste and of Les mots sans rides: the

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1. Paris: Mercure de France, 1921, pp.230-231.



conviction that the traditional conception of reality and the obsession with rational values are outmoded and no longer valid and the belief that language must be liberated, that words must be allowed in some way an independent existence and that poetry must be based on a new mode of imagery.

As will be seen in due course, by 1924 Breton has discovered the basic style he will retain, subject to certain modifications, throughout his career. This is not to say that Breton does not henceforth query his basic techniques. Indeed, the present study, especially the remainder of Part I, sets out to examine the ways in which Breton continually reassesses the nature and role of the image in his poetry and in his entire system and continually seeks alternatives to the arbitrary image as the cornerstone of Surrealist poetics, or rather expands his conception of the image to enable him to talk more in terms of analogy. However unsatisfactory the classification of types of surrealist images in the first Manifeste may appear, one can freely recognize that by 1924 Breton has come to regard the arbitrary image as the key to the new lyricism he had been seeking, and automatic writing had emerged as the method by which arbitrary images could be produced in considerable quantities and by which the subconscious voice could most easily and obviously be tapped by the poet in a receptive state.

## SECTION TWO

### DEVELOPMENTS AND MODIFICATIONS OF BRETON'S BASIC IMAGE-THEORIES: THE ARBITRARY IMAGE OR ANALOGY?

#### INTRODUCTION

From 1924, until the outbreak of the Second World War, at least, the basic ideas on the image expressed in the Manifeste du Surréalisme were not subjected to any great modification. One can discern in this period, however, two very gradual but major developments which necessarily affected Breton's thinking on the arbitrary image: on the one hand there was a gradual disillusionment with the "récit de rêve" and a hesitation as far as automatic writing is concerned and on the other hand a growing desire by Breton to bring about the "occultation of Surrealism" which was reflected at the level of imagery by a preoccupation with the notion of analogy; but although it is in the Second Manifeste du Surréalisme (1930) that Breton writes the famous words,

"JE DEMANDE L'OCCULTATION PROFONDE, VERITABLE DU SURREALISME,"  
(M 181)

this does not appear to be reflected in his poetry until much later.

This section will be based largely on what we consider to be Breton's more obviously theoretical writings published after 1924, though we are faced once again with the perennial problem for Breton scholars of separating theory and practice. The major consequence of this separation is that although there are significant observations on the image in what we shall call the "prose quartet" (Nadja, Les Vases communicants, l'Amour fou and Arcane 17), — and indeed the arbitrary image becomes almost a leitmotif and a point of reference in the four texts,—they will be discussed in Part II, which is

intended to act as a bridge between the theory of Part I and the poems proper of Part III, since it is possible to regard the four texts in question almost as poetry, despite their form and their theoretical and critical aspects. They will, in fact, be considered from these various points of view.

As a prelude to Breton's specific discussion on the image in works of the late 1920's and 1930's, it is proposed to mention briefly two other phenomena which influence in some way both the development of the surrealist image itself and the development of Breton's ideas on the image: the so-called "jeux surréalistes" and the "poème-objet."



## CHAPTER ONE

"JEUX SURREALISTES"

Although the "jeux surréalistes" are not being discussed in the same chapter as the Manifeste du Surréalisme, it must be remembered that a number of them were probably being devised at the time the Manifeste was being thought out and written. However, the most famous, the "jeu du cadavre exquis", which has already been explained (v. supra, p.72, note 1), was probably invented in 1925. Furthermore, these games are not discussed in the Manifeste.

The impetus behind this aspect of the Surrealists' activity was possibly supplied by the example of the "jeux de mots" uttered by Desnos in a state of trance and published under the title of Rose Sélavy. Perhaps the best account of the "jeux surréalistes" is the one given by Jacques Baron, a member of the original Surrealist group, in his book, L'An I du Surréalisme.<sup>1</sup> Baron feels, however, that he cannot do better than quote in his turn the beginning of an article by Ph. Audouin (sic) devoted to the "jeux surréalistes" in the Dictionnaire des Jeux published by René Alleau:

"Ce n'est pas déprécier l'activité surréaliste - telle qu'elle s'est exercée de 1924 à nos jours - que de le considérer comme un jeu, un Grand Jeu dont le prix se comptait dans l'esprit de ceux qui l'ont joué et vécu, en promesses de liberté, d'amour, de révolution, de tout ce qu'un désir intransigeant pouvait se proposer comme objet. Devançant en ceci les théoriciens modernes du jeu, les surréalistes ne semblent pas avoir douté du caractère ludique (ici, dérisoire) d'opérations sociales ou autres que leurs contemporains avaient asservies à la gravité, cependant qu'eux-mêmes s'annexaient, avec l'allégresse tragique que l'on sait, ce domaine décrié de la 'futilité' où l'un de leurs proches, Georges Bataille, quêtait les lambeaux d'une souveraineté perdue. Avant même que le mot de surréalisme fût emprunté à Apollinaire, avant même que le premier manifeste entreprît de le définir, ses futurs inventeurs jouaient: ils avaient un peu plus de vingt ans. Ils n'ont depuis jamais cessé de jouer." 2

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1. Paris: Denoël, 1969.

2. Baron, J., L'An I du Surréalisme, pp.77-78.

Although it is perfectly true that the Surrealists were aware that poetry stemmed at the dawn of history partly from games, Breton has suggested that one should not over-emphasize this idea:

"Bien que, par mesure de défense, parfois cette activité ait été dite par nous 'expérimentale', nous y cherchions avant tout le divertissement. Ce que nous avons pu y trouver d'enrichissant sous le rapport de la connaissance n'est venu qu'ensuite." (PC 50)

Nevertheless, word-games which produce bizarre images of the kind Breton found fascinating could not fail to be of interest to the poet preoccupied with the problems of inspiration and the creation of poetry. After all, Breton himself has written on another occasion of

"..... l'attachement surréaliste au jeu des définitions, des suppositions, des prévisions: 'Qu'est-ce que.... Si.... Quand....' qui m'est toujours apparu poétiquement comme la plus fabuleuse source d'images introuvables." (AF 42)

Looking back, Baron had the impression that the Surrealists, Aragon especially, were always playing games, one of which he describes thus:

".... l'un d'entre nous pliait la première page du journal en deux, de telle sorte que de la 'trois' n'apparaissent que les dernières colonnes. Un titre de la première page, coupé par la pliure, correspondait à un titre de la page 3, de manière à donner une phrase cocasse."<sup>1</sup>

He claims that curious poems were composed at that time by means of this technique. Of course, the fundamental idea is virtually the same as that of the "poems" made up of the gratuitous assembling of headlines and titles cut out of newspapers, mentioned near the end of the Manifeste (cf. supra, p.105). On the next page Baron recalls another game:

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1. Baron, J., op.cit., p.79.

".... quelqu'un prenait par hasard une feuille de papier, un crayon et, tout en parlant, traçait des lignes s'entrecroisant dans tous les sens sans aucun dessin volontaire. On découvrait, au bout du compte, dans l'enchevêtrement des lignes, un oiseau ou une danseuse. 'C'est amusant, disait Breton..... Si nous en faisons tous autant? Il y a peut-être, à partir de là, quelque image inconsciente qui nous hante et peut apparaître.' Nous nous mettions à l'ouvrage." <sup>1</sup>

So Breton was still preoccupied with the image, the source of which is in the subconscious mind, as Baron's testimony indicates. This second game described by Baron is, however, far less likely than the first to give to the Surrealists ready-made verbal images.

Yet the most famous of all the surrealist games remains the "jeu du cadavre exquis". Baron thinks the credit for its invention should go to Jacques Prévert, though, as he points out, it is nothing more than "l'ancien jeu des 'petits papiers' mis au goût du jour."

Breton has discussed this game in an article, Le cadavre exquis, son exaltation, written in 1948 and included in subsequent editions of Le Surréalisme et la Peinture. Here Breton makes the following comments about surrealist games in general:

"Quand la conversation commençait à perdre de sa verdeur autour des faits de la journée et des propositions d'intervention amusante ou scandaleuse dans la vie d'alors, il était de coutume à passer à des jeux - jeux écrits tout d'abord, combinés pour que les éléments du discours s'affrontent de manière au possible paradoxale et que la communication humaine, dévoyée ainsi au départ, fasse courir à l'esprit qui l'enregistre le maximum d'aventure." (SP 288)

Breton therefore sees these games as part of the process whereby language is stripped of its obligation to communicate. They put into practice some of the basic ideas of the Manifeste, Les mots sans rides and the Introduction au discours sur le peu de réalité.

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1. Baron, J., op.cit., p.80.



Breton goes on to write of the great attraction of the phrases produced by the "jeu du cadavre exquis". It resided for him in

".....la certitude que vaille que vaille, elles portent la marque de ce qui ne peut être engendré par un seul cerveau et qu'elles sont douées, à un beaucoup plus haut degré, du pouvoir de dérivé dont la poésie ne saurait faire trop de cas." (SP 290)

This could be seen as a step towards the accomplishment of Lautréamont's famous tenet, "La poésie doit être faite par tous. - Non par un"; it might also be regarded as a confirmation of the conviction expressed in the Manifeste about the superiority of dialogue in Surrealism.

As the source of the last two quotations may indicate, the "jeu du cadavre exquis" was extended to the domain of the visual and plastic arts, and the article in Le Surréalisme et la Peinture, from which the comments are taken, is accompanied by illustrations of pictorial "cadavres exquis", by Morise, Man Ray, Tanguy and Miró on the one hand and by Tzara(?), Valentine Hugo and Breton on the other.

Jacques Baron was even prepared to consider placing under the rubric of "jeux surréalistes" the various inquiries and questionnaires on such topics as sexuality and suicide, organized by Breton.

As far as the importance of these games for surrealist imagery is concerned, even though Breton may never have inserted a phrase produced by them in his poems proper, nonetheless their value is quite considerable, if only as a possible confirmation of certain of Breton's theories about the image: the importance of dialogue and of arbitrariness in particular.

## CHAPTER TWO

### THE "POÈME-OBJET"

The Surrealists' "experiments" at this period led to another interesting invention, the so-called "poème-objet".<sup>1</sup> It is not easy to situate precisely the steps leading up to the appearance of Breton's first "poème-objet", but one can mention some of the facts and ideas Breton would bear in mind prior to launching this new poetic genre. In reply to one of the questions put to him by André Parinaud, Breton holds forth about "objets surréalistes" (E 161-162). He gives pride of place to the manufactured articles such as a bicycle wheel and a shovel Duchamp signed around 1916, in the hope of elevating them to the rank of "objets d'art", and to the objects of Duchamp's own fabrication such as Why not sneeze?, made of a bird-cage filled with small pieces of marble, cut so as to resemble lumps of sugar, and containing, too, a thermometer. Breton cites a proposal he had made in 1923 to make and to put into circulation copies of objects seen in dreams. (PJ 24-25). Further developments were the strange constructions of Giacometti, such as the " 'boule suspendue' en impossible équilibre sur un croissant incliné", and Dali's "objets à fonctionnement symbolique (de type automatique)". It is interesting and revealing that Dali should have referred explicitly to their

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1. In an article entitled Pierre Reverdy and the "poème-objet" Julia Husson uses the same term but in a different sense from the one intended by Breton. Her use of the term is based on a quotation from Jean Cassou: "Il (Reverdy) a pénétré la substance même de l'opération cubiste; il a, avec une stricte rigueur, analysé l'esthétique cubiste dans ses textes théoriques et l'a appliquée dans ses poèmes. Ceux-ci sont les exacts analogues des toiles de ses amis, ce sont des objets de même nature." (Reverdy, poète cubiste; in Hommage à Pierre Reverdy, Rodez, Entretiens sur les Lettres et les Arts, 1961, p.63), quoted in the Australian Journal of French Studies, Vol. V, no. 1, Monash University: Hawthorn Press for the Department of Modern Languages, 1968, pp.21-22.

symbolic function; and this helps us to justify the existence of a symbolic quality in the verbal images of Surrealism. Breton regrets that a lot of the "objets surréalistes" created by Dali, Valentine Hugo, Miró, Méret Oppenheim and Man Ray are no longer in existence or have been lost, and he claims quite explicitly that his "poèmes-objets" were his contribution to this kind of activity.

Prior to this, however, in his article on Apollinaire in Les Pas perdus Breton, thinking of the Délires of Une Saison en Enfer, quotes a phrase of great significance for the future:

"Elle a autour d'elle mille objets destinés à des usages autres que ceux qu'on leur suppose." (PP 33)

The idea behind this remark is not far removed from the idea of "dépaysement", present in so many surrealist images and presumably expressed in Breton's list in the Manifeste by the category, the image of a hallucinatory order.

The justification for equating types of "Surrealist objects" with poems is prepared by the claim Breton had made near the end of the Manifeste in connection with the "collages" or "papiers collés" of Picasso and Braque (v. supra, p.105). Furthermore, the "poème-objet" could be seen as the next step after Apollinaire's "calligrammes", for whereas the "calligrammes" begin to break down the barriers between poetry and painting or drawing, the "poème-objet" exists in a twilight zone halfway between poetry in the traditional sense of the term and sculpture.

Towards the end of the first part of Les Vases communicants, after concluding that time and space in dreams are real time and space, Breton talks about an object conceived in a "jeu du cadavre exquis", a drawing of which by Breton had been reproduced in No. 9-10 of the review La Révolution Surréaliste:



".... une enveloppe vide, blanche ou très claire, sans adresse, fermée et cachetée de rouge, le cachet rond sans gravure particulière, pouvant fort bien être un cachet avant la gravure, les bords piqués de cils, portant une anse latérale pouvant servir à la tenir. Un assez pauvre calembour qui avait toutefois permis à l'objet de se constituer, fournissant le mot silence, qui me paraissait pouvoir lui servir d'accompagnement ou lui tenir lieu de désignation." (VC 64)

Breton had introduced the discussion of the significance of this object by talking about similar "objects" or "monsters" in the plastic arts, such as Dali's Le Grand Masturbateur, Picasso's Le Joueur de Clarinette, Duchamp's La Mariée, and various figures by Giacometti. Breton no longer regards these "objects" as mere paintings or sculptures: referring particularly to the object created in the "jeu du cadavre exquis", he makes the astonishing claim:

"Il s'agit bien là d'un objet poétique, qui vaut ou ne vaut pas sur le plan des images poétiques, et de rien autre." (VC 64-65)

This is a statement of immense importance, for it led Breton towards the invention of a new poetic genre, or at least a new kind of poem.

The search for Surrealist objects again looms large in L'Amour fou; and in the 1965 edition of Le Surréalisme et la Peinture three successive articles are devoted to the Crise de l'objet (written in 1936), an Exposition surréaliste d'objets (1936) and Du Poème-objet (1942). The first of these articles basically resumes the history of the Surrealist object and discusses some of its implications, e.g. its relationships with the old Hegelian adage, "Tout ce qui est réel est rationnel et tout ce qui est rationnel est réel" - once again the old problem of reality - , and the need, defined by Eluard, to create a "physique de la poésie." Breton however is quick to relate the discussion to the question of

the image:

"Les poètes, les artistes se rencontrent avec les savants au sein de ces 'champs de force' créés dans l'imagination par le rapprochement de deux images différentes. Cette faculté de rapprochement des deux images leur permet de s'élever au-dessus de la considération de la vie manifeste de l'objet, qui constitue généralement une borne." (SP 279)

Therefore, just as Surrealist language is diverted from the simple area of communication, Surrealist objects (both the "objets d'art" in their own right and those depicted in the paintings) are diverted from their normal use or are placed in an unusual context: they are "dépayés."

The second article adds that the first example of the new hybrid genre, the "poème-objet", was presented by Breton in 1929. Breton gives an ingenious interpretation of his most famous "poème-objet", created in 1941, Portrait de l'acteur A.B. Although therefore composed later than the period in question, it is an example of the process started in the 1920's. Breton begins thus his explanation of this strange poem:

"Le projet initial de l'auteur a été d'élucider en ce qui concerne un problème graphologique particulier. Ayant observé que, réduite aux initiales, sa propre signature simule le nombre 1713, il a été amené intuitivement à ne voir dans ce nombre qu'une date de l'histoire européenne et a eu la curiosité de relever les événements saillants que cette date peut marquer (il se pourrait en effet que l'un au moins de ces événements fût de nature à entraîner pour lui la fixation inconsciente à un temps révolu, voire l'identification avec ce temps). (SP 284)

Breton's interpretation of the left-hand box is:

"Ephémérides perpétuelles: niches vides et courroies de transmission (aspect dialectique du temps: les acteurs disparaissent mais leur message nous parvient.....)" (ibid)

The references to individuals are to the famous blind mathematician Sanderson, described by Diderot (who, incidentally, was born in 1713) in his Lettre sur les aveugles, to Vaucanson (a constructor of robots), and to Diderot himself. The phrase, "Paix pattes de

velours", refers to the Treaty of Utrecht in 1713, "passablement désastreuse pour la France", and is based on the stock phrase "faire patte de velours" (to draw in one's claws) and also on the fact that the city of Utrecht is famous for its velvet. The reference to claws has added significance, for in the six lower boxes of the "poème-objet" Breton makes out the shape of a cat. The phrase, "Les diplomates s'arrêtaient devant la Kleine Poortje", contains a reference to one of Utrecht's inns. Breton's interpretation of the "valise inférieure" is as follows:

"Comme on devine à travers le verre trouble, elle permet de voyager à travers le temps." (SP 285)

The plaque to the right bearing the inscription "D'un judas de Port-Royal détruite mais invulnérable je te vois pape Clément XI, vieux chien." is explained by virtue of the fact that 1713 was also the year of the Bull Unigenitus, which set the seal on the triumph of the Jesuits over the Jansenists. Port-Royal had been destroyed in the previous year and dogs were allowed to dig for bones in its cemetery. Breton declares that the effects of the moral crisis it created can still be felt even today, and sums up by saying that:

"La plaque figure à la fois la bulle elle-même, la résistance invincible que certains lui opposent et le judas par lequel l'oeil voit se dévider les circonstances historiques." (SP 284)

This somewhat idiosyncratic method of interpretation used by Breton with reference to his "poème-objet" is, in fact, the one he uses when he analyses in L'Amour fou one of his poems from Clair de Terre, Tournesol.

Although the "poème-objet" has never made the impression on subsequent Surrealist poetry Breton perhaps hoped for, it can be seen as an ancestor of the more recent "concrete poetry". Breton's "poèmes-objets" are, however, more intricate, more complex: the odd



phrases they contain are no more transparent than similar allusions in his "poèmes" proper; but as Breton's own interpretation of Portrait de l'Acteur A.B. indicates, the phrases can be explained in rational terms, by the author at least, and go hand in hand with the non-verbal images in the same "poème-objet".

Herbert Read saw this new genre as a way in which poetry borrows from life itself and tries to speak with a new voice.<sup>1</sup> It is doubtful whether Breton would necessarily agree that, in order for poetry to borrow from life, it has to have recourse to such a direct approach; rather Breton is fascinated during the period in question by objects ("objets trouvés", "objets surréalistes", "objets à fonctionnement symbolique"), and he wants to integrate such objects into poetry and thereby to extend the potential of poetry.

To the objection that the "poème-objet" may not appear to be immediately relevant to Breton's ideas on imagery, it must be pointed out firstly that Breton literally adds a new dimension to the concept of the image, secondly that the "poème-objet" inevitably makes Breton think even more deeply about the importance of the notion of "dépaysement" in imagery, thirdly that it must have led Breton to compare the painter's conception of the term "image" with that of the poet, which, of course, is fundamental to the relevance of Le Surréalisme et la Peinture for the present study.<sup>2</sup>

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1. cf. Read, H., Surrealism, London: Faber and Faber Ltd., (1936) 1971, p.248.

2. Moreover, one can cite a reference made much later to the "poème-objet" which does relate it to the image:

"On sait que, sous-jacente aux conceptions surréalistes du 'poème-objet' et des 'objets à fonctionnement symbolique, objets oniriques, etc.', qui se firent jour à partir de 1931, l'idée d'une 'hiéroglyphique' généralisée a trouvé son expression la plus vive dans l'image telle que la poésie surréaliste l'a promue, pour sa part, et s'est en quelque part, et s'est en quelque sorte, 'révélée' à elle-même dans le jeu surréaliste de l'un dans l'autre." (AM 16)

### CHAPTER THREE

#### THE DISCUSSION OF THE IMAGE IN "LE SURREALISME ET LA PEINTURE" (1928)

Le Surréalisme et la Peinture, published in February 1928, was the first major work by Breton to come out since the Manifeste. Although in the remainder of this section it is not proposed to study individual books as such, but rather to extract from the series of important prose-works Breton produces up to the beginning of the Second World War certain basic themes and trends related to the question of the image, because the nature of Le Surréalisme et la Peinture is inevitably somewhat different from that of Nadja, the Second Manifeste du Surréalisme, Les Vases communicants and L'Amour fou, it is being considered separately. It does make a particular contribution to an appreciation of Breton's views on the image.

Up to now reference has been made to Le Surréalisme et la Peinture in connection with the "jeu du cadavre exquis" and the evolution of the "poème-objet", comments on neither of which featured in the first edition of this very interesting and very important book. Of course, in Le Surréalisme et la Peinture Breton sets out to defend and to illustrate the ideas, theories and attitudes of those contemporary artists whose contribution to the history and development of art Breton regarded as the most significant: Picasso, Braque, Chirico, Ernst, Man Ray, André Masson, Miró, Tanguy, Arp.

Le Surréalisme et la Peinture established Breton as a major art-critic, but as far as the present study is concerned, the prime importance of the book lies in the light it sheds on Breton's conception of the term "image", and we propose to restrict comments to those points which are of immediate relevance to Breton's own poetry and theories, to the question of the image in particular.

One can point throughout the ages to groups of artists and poets working towards the same ends and influenced by the same ideas, but it is rare that one finds such a close collaboration of poets and artists as there was within the Surrealist movement.

Although Breton is generally regarded as the main theoretician of the movement, it is difficult to determine whether the Surrealist poets influenced their brother-artists or vice versa. Louis Parrot goes so far as to claim in his book on Eluard:

"On ne saurait juger la production poétique de cette époque sans tenir compte de l'influence exercée par la peinture et plus exactement par ses théoriciens."<sup>1</sup>

Parrot mentions in this respect Ernst, Picasso and, above all, Chirico.

However, as Eluard himself has observed, the aims of the Surrealist painters were virtually the same as those of the poets of the movement:

"Ils (les peintres surréalistes) poursuivent tous le même effort pour libérer la vision, pour joindre l'imagination à la nature, pour considérer tout ce qui est possible comme réel, pour montrer qu'il n'y a pas de dualisme entre l'imagination et la réalité, que tout ce que l'esprit de l'homme peut concevoir et créer provient de la même veine, est de la même matière que sa chair, que son sang et que le monde qui l'entoure."<sup>2</sup>

Eight years earlier, however, in Le Surréalisme et la Peinture, Breton discusses at length much the same idea.

Breton had been employed at the beginning of the 1920's on a rather casual basis by the famous "couturier", Jacques Doucet, as his private art-collector, and succeeded in obtaining for his patron many fine examples of the work of the great young artists of the day, some of whom at the time were still "undiscovered".

1. Parrot, L., Paul Eluard, Paris: Seghers (Coll. 'Poètes d'aujourd'hui'), 1964 edition, p.25.
2. Eluard, P., L'Evidence poétique (1936), in O.C., Paris: Gallimard (Coll. 'Pléiade'), t.1, 1968, p.516.



As the Note de l'Editeur in the 1965 edition indicates, Breton had a marvellous eye for the young artists whom generations to come would acclaim:

"Alors qu'aujourd'hui les artistes qu'il célébrait dans ces pages à la fois rigoureuses et exaltées se sont vus inscrits fort haut dans la hiérarchie officieuse des 'valeurs plastiques', il n'est pas inutile de rappeler quel esprit d'aventure présida à la découverte d'un Max Ernst totalement méprisé par la critique, voire d'un Picasso encore obligé de se 'justifier', aux yeux de ses quelques admirateurs, de la prodigieuse invention du 'cubisme'."<sup>1</sup>

The book opens with a defiant claim of paramount importance for the entire Surrealist movement:

"L'oeil existe à l'état sauvage." (SP 1)

With this powerful, surprising, violent image Breton evokes the primitive, childlike, irrational quality of perception possessed by Surrealist artists and poets; the depiction of the eye as an isolated object in a strange environment or a solitary creature living in the wild has the effect of concentrating all the reader's attention on the concept of vision; and in his presentation of the various artists in this book Breton creates the impression that he, in turn, is seeing into their secrets in a new way.

The aspect of the work of Miró which makes Breton consider him as perhaps "le plus 'surréaliste' de nous tous", is precisely his overwhelming desire to give himself over completely to a pure automatism. (SP 36-37)

The motifs of Tanguy's canvases are described in connection with the question of reality:

"Il va sans dire que ceux qui dans ses toiles distingueront ici ou là une sorte d'animal, un semblant d'arbuste, quelque chose comme de la fumée, continueront à se faire plus forts qu'ils ne sont, à placer tous leurs espoirs dans ce qu'ils appellent la réalité." (SP 44)

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1. Breton, A., Le Surréalisme et la Peinture, (The page of the Note de l'Editeur is not numbered).

Breton continues to attack the commonly held conception of reality, especially when critics expect art to model itself on this inadequate conception. Breton is of the opinion that Tanguy uses objects from the real world as points of contrast, thanks to which other elements take on their occult significance. That is the importance of this kind of contact:

"Ce contact, qu'il se garderait de perdre, lui permet de s'aventurer aussi loin qu'il veut et de nous livrer l'inconnu des images aussi concrètes que celles que nous nous passons du connu." (*ibid.*)

These images in Tanguy's paintings possess exactly the same characteristics as the verbal images in Surrealist poetry:

"Que sont au juste de telles images? A ces limites où l'esprit se refuse à tout emprunt extérieur, où l'homme ne veut plus tirer argument que de son existence propre, dans ce domaine des formes pures où toute méditation sur la peinture nous introduit, là où la balle de plume pèse autant que la balle de plomb, où tout peut voler comme s'enfouir, où les choses les plus adverses se rencontrent, sans catastrophe, où l'on sait qu'une tête jeune restera une tête jeune, où le feu consent à prendre sur l'eau, - et si l'on passe même du secours des visions, si l'on ne pille pas les épaves du rêve, - que va-t-on chercher et que trouve-t-on?"  
(SP 44)

In these words one finds allusions to negations of elementary physical properties, to the juxtaposition of distant realities or of opposites, to a world where time has no meaning. The universe of Tanguy is virtually the same as the universe of Breton. The sole difference is that whereas Tanguy's imagery is expressed in terms of form and colour, Breton's is, of course, expressed in words. Tanguy is, in any case, the painter Breton would like to have been.

Breton's reflections on Tanguy lead him to make a number of statements of considerable importance, as far as the image is concerned. Tanguy's canvases make Breton re-examine his notion of "paysage" and this provokes the challenging declaration:

"L'idée des trois règnes est, du reste, un contresens absolu."  
(SP 44-46)

Breton sees no point in distinguishing between animal, vegetable and mineral, and he seeks to justify his assertion with the following question:

"Si une phyllie se pose sur une branche, qui soutiendra qu'un peu plus tard ce ne sera pas à sa place une feuille quelconque de l'arbre qui s'envole? Je sais qu'en pareil cas on préférera croire au départ d'un autre insecte-feuille, et ainsi de suite jusqu'à l'hiver." (SP 46)

The example is carefully chosen: the "phyllie" is an insect which resembles the shape and colouring of a leaf.

The very same example had, in fact, been cited by Remy de Gourmont, though simply to illustrate the phenomenon of "mimétisme":

"La phyllie, un grand insecte de l'Inde qui vit dans les feuilles, ressemble à une feuille, dont elle a la couleur et les nervures; ses pattes ont l'aspect de feuilles naissantes ou de moitiés de feuilles." <sup>1</sup>

One is reminded of Moritake's well-known haikai quoted by Ezra Pound:

"The fallen blossom flies back to its branch:  
A butterfly." <sup>2</sup>

Though the "phyllie" has replaced the butterfly and a leaf the blossom, the effect is exactly the same.

At a different level, however, as Victor Crastre has pointed out, <sup>3</sup> in this contesting of the barriers between the three categories, Surrealism is exploiting the discoveries made by Sir Jagadis Chandra Bose, the Indian plant physiologist and physicist, discoveries tending to prove the existence of a general property common to all forms of matter, organic and inorganic.

Breton then recalls the conversation between Hamlet and Polonius:

1. Le Problème du Style, p.57.

2. v. Brooke-Rose, C., A ZBC of Ezra Pound, p.98.

3. André Breton, p.176.



"Hamlet: Do you see yonder cloud that's almost in shape of a camel?

Polonius: By the Mass, and 'tis a camel, indeed.

H. Methinks it is like a weasel.

P. It's backed like a weasel.

H. Or like a whale?

P. Very like a whale."

And so Breton concludes:

"Les nuages du pauvre Hamlet, si semblables à des animaux: mais c'étaient des animaux! Il n'y a pas de paysages. Pas même d'horizon. Il n'y a, du côté physique, que notre immense suspicion qui entoure tout." (SP 46)

It soon becomes very evident, when one reads Breton's poems, and indeed when one reads the poetry of any Surrealist, that the creatures and objects mentioned in the images very easily and very quickly acquire equal value. The distinction between animal, vegetable and mineral ceases to be important, though one can still compile lists of different types of nouns - bestiaries, names of minerals, names of flowers - to indicate the different spheres from which the vocabulary of the imagery is drawn. Such lists, however, reveal little of the function the words and objects or creatures in them possess in Breton's poetry, their prime functions are to evoke qualities, sensations, associations, to point to links with other words, and above all, to reveal analogies.

Breton's final comments on Hamlet's clouds reveal, however, that for the Surrealist, in the field of imagery, everything is possible: he has "carte blanche".

Over the years, Breton will continue to write about those artists who evoke a state of "surréalité". Consequently, later editions of Le Surréalisme et la Peinture will expand considerably the views on art expressed by Breton in 1928. He will continue to review and point out what he finds significant in the work of the

great Surrealist painters who are featured in the first edition, but the perpetual state of "devenir" of the Surrealist movement will be reflected in the new names which will appear and in the fresh ideas and fresh motifs they bring with them. From time to time, in the remaining pages of this thesis, some of Breton's later comments on Surrealist art will be mentioned, as and when they have a direct bearing on Breton's poetry or on his ideas on the image.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### DOUBTS ABOUT AUTOMATIC WRITING

It was seen in the examination of the Manifeste du Surréalisme and of the influences on Breton's poetics that although Breton's ideas on the arbitrary quality of an image were developments of the image-theories of Lautréamont, Apollinaire, Saint-Pol-Roux and Reverdy, nevertheless the question of the arbitrary image was linked very closely to the discovery and use of automatic writing. One might be tempted to conclude, therefore, that should the use of automatic writing be undermined or even abandoned, the arbitrary image might be jettisoned, too. This does not turn out to be the case, however. Even though Breton gradually gives the appearance of becoming somewhat disillusioned with automatic writing in the years after 1924 and gradually returns to a more conscious, more controlled method of composition, the arbitrary image remains the kernel of his poetics.

The first doubts about automatic writing were voiced in the Second Manifeste du Surréalisme, the first version of which appeared in the twelfth issue of La Révolution Surréaliste in December 1929, but which came out in book-form in the next year.

In the years separating the two Manifestes a number of important developments had taken place within the Surrealist movement. On the one hand there were the discussions with the Communists, on the other hand there were the individual developments of certain of the Surrealists in the artistic and literary fields. In one of his radio interviews with André Parinaud, Breton stresses the importance of just the three years between 1926 and 1929 in this latter respect:



"L'époque comprise entre 1926 et 1929 apporte une floraison d'oeuvres surréalistes qui est souvent considérée comme la plus éclatante. Aragon publie Le Paysan de Paris et Traité du style, Artaud Le Pèse-nerfs, Crevel L'Esprit contre la Raison, Desnos Deuil pour Deuil et La Liberté ou l'amour, Eluard Capitale de la Douleur et l'Amour la Poésie, Ernst La Femme 100 têtes, Péret Le Grand Jeu, moi-même Nadja, Le Surréalisme et la Peinture. C'est aussi, du point de vue surréaliste, une des époques les plus saillantes sur le plan plastique, parce qu'une de celles où l'invention a la plus grande part chez Arp, Ernst, Masson, Miró, Man Ray, Tanguy, de son côté Picasso y opère une très sensible évolution vers nous." (E 134-135)

Whereas the first Manifeste concentrates on the application of the discoveries of Breton and others in the field of poetry, much of the Second Manifeste is devoted to the relations between the Surrealists and the Communists and to detailed accounts of the exclusions from the Surrealist group; but despite the changes the Surrealist movement underwent after 1924, Breton continued to be fascinated by questions of poetics, notably the fundamental question of inspiration. Surrealism continued to operate on the linguistic plane, the problem of language was still of paramount importance, and Breton insists that this is the case:

"Le problème de l'action sociale n'est, je tiens à y revenir et j'y insiste, qu'une des formes d'un problème plus général que le surréalisme s'est mis en devoir de soulever et qui est celui de l'expression humaine sous toutes ses formes. Qui dit expression dit, pour commencer, langage. Il ne faut donc pas s'étonner de voir le surréalisme se situer tout d'abord presque uniquement sur le plan du langage et, non plus, du retour de quelque incursion que ce soit, y revenir comme pour le plaisir de s'y comporter en pays conquis. Rien, en effet, ne peut plus empêcher que, pour une grande part, ce pays soit conquis." (M 158)

Breton knows that the works of the major Surrealists in the 1920's had begun to get to grips with the basic problem of language, and consequently he is fairly satisfied with their achievements. He affirms that he continues to have faith in the main Surrealist techniques and reaffirms their importance:

".... je puis bien dire que nous n'avons trouvé aucune raison valable de revenir sur les moyens d'expression qui nous sont propres et dont à l'usage il nous a été donné de vérifier qu'ils nous servaient bien." (M 159)

Breton is prepared to admit criticism of individual surrealist images, but, as he points out:

".... on n'en sera pas quitte pour cela avec les images." (M 159)

He likewise reaffirms the importance of the discoveries and methods of Freud. He still regards Freudian criticism as "la seule vraiment fondée". (M 165)

On the other hand, Breton is beginning to express misgivings about automatic writing and he admits here that he had been a little disappointed both by it and by the "récit de rêve" as direct sources of poetry, though dream-narration will play an important role in the examination of the states of dream and reality in Les Vases communicants two years later:

"Il est regrettable ..... que des efforts plus systématiques et plus suivis, comme n'a pas cessé d'en réclamer le surréalisme, n'aient été fournis dans la voie de l'écriture automatique, par exemple, et des récits de rêves. Malgré l'insistance que nous avons mise à introduire des textes de ce caractère dans les publications surréalistes et la place remarquable qu'ils occupent dans certains ouvrages, il faut avouer que leur intérêt a quelquefois peine à s'y soutenir ou qu'ils y font un peu trop l'effet de 'morceaux de bravoure'. L'apparition d'un poncif indiscutable à l'intérieur de ces textes est aussi tout à fait préjudiciable à l'espèce de conversion que nous voulions opérer par eux." (M 163)

One is reminded of the rather biting comment made by Aragon in his Traité du style:

"Si vous écrivez, suivant une méthode surréaliste, de tristes imbécillités, ce sont de tristes imbécillités, sans excuse." <sup>1</sup>

Breton lays the blame for the sometimes disappointing automatic texts fairly and squarely on the negligence of the authors, and

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1. op.cit., Paris: Gallimard, 1928, p.192.

so he reiterates what the purpose of automatic writing is and gives a clear explanation of the special merit of automatic texts:

"La grande valeur qu'elles présentent pour le surréalisme tient, en effet, à ce qu'elles sont susceptibles de nous livrer des étendues logiques particulières, très précisément celles où jusqu'ici la faculté logique, exercée en tout et pour tout dans le conscient, n'agit pas." (M 163)

This is reminiscent of T.S. Eliot's claim:

"There is a logic of the imagination as well as a logic of concepts." <sup>1</sup>

Breton knows that, despite the efforts of Freud and his disciples and despite the efforts of the Surrealists, this is still an area in which our knowledge is very limited. Breton, in 1929-30, is still very interested in the nature of the Surrealist voice; he is still interested in subconscious thought. He remains convinced that there lies the secret, the key to the problem of inspiration, and so he demands a more intense study of this question he, as a poet, finds so absorbing:

"Par ailleurs il (le surréalisme) exige que, par le chemin inverse de celui que nous venons de les voir suivre, ceux qui possèdent, au sens freudien, la 'précieuse faculté' dont nous parlons, s'appliquent à étudier sous ce jour le mécanisme complexe entre tous de l'inspiration et, à partir du moment où l'on cesse de tenir celle-ci pour une chose sacrée, que, tout à la confiance qu'ils ont en son extraordinaire vertu, ils ne songent qu'à faire tomber ses derniers liens, voire, - ce qu'on n'eût jamais encore osé concevoir - à se la soumettre." (M 166)

Breton refuses to join the ranks of those who find it fashionable to decry the notion of inspiration; on the contrary, he remains convinced that it has played a vital role in the history of mankind. He still desires to uncover its secrets, but in the meantime he claims that Surrealism has achieved the impossible in developing the creative powers of the imagination, and he acknowledges the importance

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1. Translation of Anabase, pp.9-10.



of automatic writing and dream-narration in this respect. Breton repeats his belief that a prime aim of Surrealism is to provoke moments of inspiration:

"Il (le surréalisme) ne tient et il ne tiendra jamais à rien tant qu'à reproduire artificiellement ce moment idéal où l'homme, en proie à une émotion particulière, est soudain empoigné par ce 'plus fort que lui' qui le jette, à son corps défendant, dans l'immortel." (*ibid.*)

Breton is fully aware of the importance of inspiration in the creation of metaphor. Though he may have disagreed about certain other matters with Remy de Gourmont, he is here expressing very similar views about inspiration to those in La Culture des idées:

"A l'état de veille, l'inspiration semble la manifestation la plus claire du subconscient dans le domaine de la création intellectuelle." <sup>1</sup>

Even though Breton in the Second Manifeste may express a certain disappointment about the way automatic writing had been used by some individuals, by and large he continues to place his hopes on the original Surrealist methods. The Second Manifeste is, however, by no means as optimistic about the use of automatic writing as its predecessor had been.

Automatic writing is considered again in a couple of the chapters of Breton's second collection of letters, essays and articles, Point du Jour, which was published in July 1934; and the importance of this new collection resides above all, as far as the present study is concerned, in those two sections, the Lettre à A. Rolland de Renéville (February 1932) and Le Message automatique (December 1933).

In the former, Breton springs to the defence of automatic writing, refuting the accusations that he and Eluard in L'Immaculée

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1. op.cit., Paris, Mercure de France, 1910, p.55.

Conception had displayed a distrust of this method:

"Le courant de désaffectation générale auquel nous vous paraissions obéir vous donne à supposer qu'Eluard et moi, dans la partie centrale de notre livre L'Immaculée Conception, nous donnons des signes de défiance à l'égard de l'écriture automatique et des autres formes de la pensée 'non dirigée'. Nous nous apprêterions à renoncer ainsi, peu à peu, à la méthode surréaliste même et déjà le premier pas serait fait dans la voie du retour à ce que Tzara nomme, dans le numéro 4 du Surréalisme A. S. D. L. R., la 'poésie-moyen d'expression'. Je puis vous assurer qu'il n'en est rien. Tout d'abord nous n'avons jamais prétendu donner le moindre texte surréaliste comme exemple parfait d'automatisme verbal. Même dans le mieux 'non dirigé' se perçoivent, il faut bien le dire, certains frottements (encore que je n'aie pas désespéré de les éviter tout à fait, par un moyen à découvrir). Toujours est-il qu'un minimum de direction subsiste, généralement dans le sens de l'arrangement en poème." (PJ 95-96)

This is, of course, a significant concession. As soon as there is an attempt to organize the automatic discourse into the form of a poem, there is "un souci de composition", a preoccupation with some degree of aesthetic consideration, which appeared to be anathema to the movement at the outset.

Still thinking principally of L'Immaculée Conception, Breton goes on:

"L'automatisme psychique, comme on pouvait le prévoir, est venu remplir avec une force extraordinaire le cadre que nous lui avons fixé. Il me semble impossible de parler de pensée dirigée dans ces conditions." (PJ 97)

Breton thus appears from this letter to continue to be content with automatic writing.

The really significant discussion of automatic writing in Point du Jour is found, however, in its final essay, Le Message automatique, a purely theoretical piece.

Considering once more the nature of certain phrases he registers in the moments before falling asleep, Breton is led eventually to ponder seriously on the state of automatic writing at that particular time in the history of the Surrealist movement. Breton is

aware of the problems automatic writing still presents:

".... il faut avouer que la pleine lumière est loin d'avoir été faite sur les conditions dans lesquelles, pour être pleinement valable, un texte ou un dessin 'automatique' devrait être obtenu." (PJ 169)

He confesses to having played down the difficulties inherent in the method; he admits the difficulty one experiences in trying to distinguish the genuine automatic text from the pastiche; he recognizes that some of the Surrealists had attempted to make critical evaluations of the texts; he realizes, too, that some of them had used automatic writing merely in a quest for imagery for their poetry at the expense of recording faithfully the "voix surréaliste". Breton himself must stand accused of this, and indeed it is surely one of the primary reasons why he took an interest in automatic writing in the first place. The above points explain, however, why Breton feels forced to concede, rather sadly:

"L'histoire de l'écriture automatique dans le surréalisme serait, je ne crains pas de le dire, celle d'une infortune continue...." (PJ 171)

Breton's way of tackling the problem is to stress the need for a return to basic principles, and he suggests that one must distinguish very carefully between Surrealist automatic writing and automatic drawing on the one hand and the automatic writing and drawing practised by Spiritualist mediums on the other. Breton claims that whereas spiritualists believe that the content of their texts is exogenous and attribute them to spirits, thus dissociating the psychological personality of the medium,

"..... le surréalisme ne se propose rien moins que d'unifier cette personnalité." (PJ 181)

Moreover, Breton reminds the reader that the Surrealists have observed that the subliminal message is a patrimony common to all men.



It is only at the end of the essay that the question of automatic writing is discussed with reference to the image, but, in fact, the final pages do contain a number of important ideas concerning Surrealist imagery. Their starting-point is the interesting claim:

"Toujours est-il que je tiens, et c'est là l'essentiel, les inspirations verbales pour infiniment plus riches de sens visuel, pour infiniment plus résistantes à l'oeil, que les images visuelles proprement dites." (PJ 185)

This claim is developed a few lines further on in the following terms:

"Toujours en poésie l'automatisme verbo-auditif m'a paru créateur à la lecture des images visuelles les plus exaltantes, jamais l'automatisme verbo-visuel ne m'a paru créateur à la lecture d'images visuelles qui puissent, de loin, leur être comparées."  
(PJ 186)

This observation confirms that Breton's natural medium is language, that he is a man for whom imagination operates in terms of words, that he is a poet rather than a pictorial artist.

Breton still believes in the importance of verbo-auditive automatism in the creation of exciting and surprising images, and furthermore, in the creation of hallucinatory images:

"L'écriture automatique, pratiquée avec quelque ferveur, mène tout droit à l'hallucination visuelle, j'en ai fait personnellement l'expérience, et il suffit de se reporter à 'Alchimie du verbe' pour constater que Rimbaud l'avait faite bien avant moi." (PJ 187)

The mention of hallucination and hallucinatory images leads Breton next to a rather curious point, but one which has connections with the "jeu de l'un dans l'autre" which Breton was to consider to be one of the most important post-war discoveries of the Surrealists in the field of imagery.<sup>1</sup> He refers to the claims of the Marburg school:

"Selon les maîtres de cette école (Kiesow, Jaensch) pourraient être cultivées chez l'enfant de remarquables dispositions qui consistent à pouvoir changer, en le fixant, un objet quelconque en n'importe quoi. Au dire des expérimentateurs le retrait d'un objet qu'on l'a invité à examiner pendant une quinzaine de secondes peut entraîner chez l'enfant non la formation d'une

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1. v. Chapter Nine of this section.

post-image nébuleuse, faiblissante et de couleur complémentaire à celle de l'objet considéré, mais une image dite eidétique (esthétique) très nette, présentant une grande minutie dans les détails et affectée de la couleur même de l'objet. Cette image serait changeante à l'infini; ..... Toute l'expérimentation en cours serait de nature à démontrer que la perception et la représentation - qui semblent à l'adulte ordinaire s'opposer d'une manière si radicale - ne sont à tenir que pour les produits de dissociation d'une faculté unique, originelle dont l'image eidétique rend compte et dont on retrouve trace chez le primitif et chez l'enfant. Cet état de grâce, tous ceux qui ont souci de définir la véritable condition humaine, plus ou moins confusément aspirent à le retrouver. Je dis que c'est l'automatisme seul qui y mène....." (PJ 187-189)

Obviously the consequences of these remarks for our understanding of perception in poetry is considerable: though Husserl may have used the term "eidétique" to designate essences, this is not the most important aspect here; this resides rather in Breton's realization that perception is not merely a sensory phenomenon but that the imagination, too, is involved.

Breton, therefore, reaffirms his basic faith in automatism, while desiring its more stringent use. He is convinced of its importance in the creation of startling imagery. Despite his talk of a return to first principles, however, he does not insist now on writing without a preconceived subject. (In L'Immaculée Conception the titles of the chapters were settled beforehand, and, as will be seen when Breton's recueils are examined in detail, a similar change becomes even more apparent when Breton writes poems in the 1930's and 1940's). This is an essential change.

Breton will continue from time to time to laud the virtues of automatism. In 1941, when he adds to his earlier study of Surrealist art, Le Surréalisme et la Peinture, a second part with the title Genèse et perspective artistiques du surréalisme, his appreciation of the work of his close friend André Masson leads him to observe that:

"La découverte essentielle du surréalisme est, en effet, que, sans intention préconçue, la plume qui court pour écrire ou le crayon qui court pour dessiner, file une substance infiniment précieuse dont tout n'est peut-être pas matière d'échange mais qui, du moins, apparaît chargée de tout ce que le poète ou le peintre recèle alors d'émotionnel."<sup>1</sup>

Thus Breton in 1941 still regards the product of genuine automatism as being an infinitely precious substance for the artist or poet, and in the same text he reiterates the prime asset of automatism, as far as Surrealism is concerned:

"Une oeuvre ne peut être tenue pour surréaliste qu'autant que l'artiste s'est efforcé d'atteindre le champ psychophysique total (dont le champ de conscience n'est qu'une faible partie)."<sup>2</sup>

Having established once more this basic fact, Breton stresses the absolute superiority of automatism in this connection over the other obvious possible method, the direct use of oneiric material:

"L'automatisme conduit à cette région en droite ligne. L'autre route qui s'est offerte au surréalisme pour y parvenir, la fixation dite 'en trompe-l'oeil' (et c'est là sa faiblesse) des images de rêve, s'est avérée à l'expérience beaucoup moins sûre et même abondant en risques d'égarement."<sup>3</sup>

Though by 1941 automatism seems restored by Breton to its original position of prime importance in Surrealism, within the actual period this chapter is ostensibly covering two other indications of "malaise", as far as automatic writing is concerned, can be noted.

The first sign of this "malaise" within the Surrealist group is Eluard's distinction between "récits de rêve", automatic texts and poems, in the "prière d'insérer" of Les Dessous d'une Vie (1926), a distinction reaffirmed in the tenth number of the review Minotaure (1937):

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1. Breton, A., Le Surréalisme et la Peinture, New York, Brentano's Inc., 1945, p.92.

2. ibid., p.93.

3. ibid., p.94.



"Il est extrêmement souhaitable que l'on n'établisse pas une confusion entre les différents textes de ce livre: rêves, textes surréalistes et poèmes.

Des rêves, nul ne peut les prendre pour des poèmes. Ils sont, pour un esprit préoccupé du merveilleux, la réalité vivante. Mais des poèmes, par lesquels l'esprit tente de désensibiliser le monde, de susciter l'aventure et de subir des enchantements, il est indispensable de savoir qu'ils sont la conséquence d'une volonté assez bien définie, l'écho d'un espoir ou d'un désespoir formulé.

Inutilité de la poésie: le monde sensible est exclu des textes surréalistes et la plus sublime lumière froide éclaire les hauteurs où l'esprit jouit d'une liberté telle qu'il ne songe même pas à se vérifier."<sup>1</sup>

Much later, in 1952, Breton formally challenges this distinction:

"Cette division par genres, avec prédilection marquée pour le poème 'comme conséquence d'une volonté bien définie', m'a paru d'emblée ultra-rétrograde et en contradiction formelle avec l'esprit surréaliste." (E 106)

Yet in the 1920's Breton's review La Révolution Surréaliste invariably classified the writings of the members of the group under one of the three headings. During the 1920's and 1930's Breton made no positive declaration which invalidated Eluard's distinction between the "récit de rêve", the "texte surréaliste" and the "poème". The facts would seem to indicate, on the contrary, that Breton grew more and more interested in the poem, perhaps against his principles, even though he almost certainly used material provided by automatic writing when he was composing poems, as did Eluard and other Surrealists Breton criticized on this score, and it is fairly apparent that Breton continued to include oneiric imagery in his poetry for a long time to come.

The second indication of a "malaise" on Breton's part in this period, as far as automatic writing is concerned, and of a return to a more conscious, more controlled manner of composing poems, is provided by the final part of an explanation his second wife, Jacqueline,

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1. Eluard, P., Le poète et son ombre, Paris: Seghers, 1963, p.102.

has given recently of the circumstances of the writing of L'Air de l'Eau (1934):

"It must also be remembered that automatic writing was over for him at that period and although always spontaneously born, each sentence was worked over, endlessly, as a thing that is foreseen and at the same time outlived."<sup>1</sup>

L'Air de l'Eau was written roughly six months after Le Message automatique, which appeared to contain a reaffirmation of Breton's basic faith in automatism. It may indicate that by 1933-4 Breton was distinguishing between the two essential purposes of automatic writing, which may have been confused a decade or so earlier when the Surrealist movement was born: the need to produce new and modern images for poetry on the one hand and the desire to explore, from a scientific point of view, the workings of the subconscious mind. However, one cannot deny that a number of Breton's statements on automatism in the 1930's and early 1940's appear to be somewhat contradictory and evince some uncertainty on his part about its future use.

If one examines the effects of this uncertainty about automatic writing on the importance and role of the arbitrary image in Breton's creative writings in the 1930's, it does not appear to bring about any great change. As will be seen in the third part of this study, the arbitrary image continues to be the dominant type of image in Breton's "recueils" up to the outbreak of the Second World War at least, even though L'Air de l'Eau, perhaps Breton's finest collection of short poems, was written in a very controlled and deliberate manner; and as will be seen in Part II, the arbitrary image continues to play a special role, too, in some of Breton's major prose works of

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1. In Balakian, A., André Breton, p.143. The letter from Jacqueline to Anna Balakian is dated August 2nd, 1968.

the inter-war years. Before then, however, it is proposed to consider what effects, if any, the "occultation" of Surrealism demanded by Breton has on his views on imagery in the same period.



## CHAPTER FIVE

### THE "OCCULTATION" OF SURREALISM IN THE INTER-WAR YEARS

It has already been pointed out that the emphasis in the Second Manifeste du Surréalisme is laid in different areas from that of the Manifeste of 1924. Though much space is devoted to political considerations and to the series of exclusions from the original Surrealist group, the latter part of the text, beginning with the demand for the so-called "occultation" of the movement, gives it a new dimension.

Breton and certain other Surrealists had felt obliged to question the social régime under which they lived; hence their negotiations with members of the Communist party and the adhesion of a number of them, including Breton, to the party, if only for a short time. The Second Manifeste gives Breton's account of the suspicious and even puerile attitude of some of the Communists towards the Surrealists, and reveals how he was very quickly disillusioned by the Communist Party and by what was required of him:

"On me demandait de faire à la cellule 'du gaz' un rapport sur la situation italienne en spécifiant que je n'eusse à m'appuyer que sur des faits statistiques (production de l'acier, etc.) et surtout pas d'idéologie. Je n'ai pas pu." (M 150-151)

In addition, the Second Manifeste contains Breton's somewhat vituperative reasons for the exclusion from the group of a number of the original Surrealists, who, in various ways, had incurred the wrath of Breton.

The discussion of automatic writing in the Second Manifeste has already been considered. In keeping with the more revolutionary tone of the Second Manifeste, however, the new criterion Breton suggests for judging poetry is its subversive value, which he now

regards as being far more important than its purely formal qualities:

"Il est vrai que la question poétique a cessé ces dernières années de se poser sous l'angle essentiellement formel et, certes, il nous intéresse davantage de juger de la valeur subversive d'une oeuvre comme celle d'Aragon, de Crevel, d'Eluard, de Péret, en lui tenant compte de sa lumière propre et de ce qu'à cette lumière l'impossible rend au possible, le permis vole au défendu, que de savoir pourquoi tel ou tel écrivain juge bon, çà et là, d'aller à la ligne." (M 173)

It would be wrong to attribute the importance attached by the remaining Surrealists to the criterion of subversion solely to their negotiations with the Communist Party in the 1920's. The subversive element is present, in some form or another, in their works right from the outset and remains long after Breton's hopes were dashed by the Communists. One might expect that the increasing emphasis laid on the subversive aspect of poetry rather than on its formal aspect might reduce the importance the Surrealists attached to the image. There is little evidence, however, to indicate that this is so. In any case, the surrealist image itself could be described as subversive, in the way it constitutes an attack on reason and logic.

Furthermore, a significant extension of Surrealist principles Breton makes in the Second Manifeste serves to reinforce the position of the image: a more detailed relation of the Surrealist techniques to the question of the "alchemy of the word". Breton's discussion of Rimbaud's famous phrase opens an extremely significant section of the Second Manifeste, towards the end of the book:

"Alchimie du verbe: ces mots qu'on va répétant un peu au hasard aujourd'hui demandent à être pris au pied de la lettre. Si le chapitre d'Une Saison en Enfer qu'ils désignent ne justifie peut-être pas toute leur ambition, il n'en est pas moins vrai qu'il peut être tenu le plus authentiquement pour l'amorce de l'activité difficile qu'aujourd'hui seul le surréalisme poursuit." (M 177)

Breton had, of course, referred to the notion of the "Alchimie du verbe" at the beginning of Les mots sans rides, but there he

speaks of the sounding of basic properties of words by modern poets in terms of a "verbal chemistry" (v. supra, p. 113). Breton proceeds to show, however, that he is quite aware of the implications of his new claim about the alchemy of the word, for he attempts to justify the very concept of a linguistic, or poetic alchemy, by pointing out the similarities he sees between the investigations and experiments of the Surrealists and the aspirations of the medieval alchemists:

"Je demande qu'on veuille bien observer que les recherches surréalistes présentent, avec les recherches alchimiques, une remarquable analogie de but: la pierre philosophale n'est rien autre que ce qui devait permettre à l'imagination de l'homme de prendre sur toutes choses une revanche éclatante et nous voici de nouveau, après des siècles de domestication de l'esprit et de résignation folle, à tenter d'affranchir définitivement cette imagination par le 'long, immense, raisonné dérèglement de tous les sens' et le reste." (M 178)

Of course, Breton plays down the aims of traditional alchemy by regarding it simply as a triumph of the spirit or the imagination, but it is by selecting this aspect of alchemy that he can best demonstrate his idea. Further evidence Breton produces of the similarity between Surrealism and alchemy is a description by Flamel of a picture which, for Breton, would be "le tableau surréaliste", and the fact that Breton welcomes the return of a state of furor, four species of which had been distinguished by Cornelius Agrippa, the four frenzies or "furores" of the Neoplatonists:

"Et qu'on comprenne bien qu'il ne s'agit pas d'un simple regroupement des mots ou d'une redistribution capricieuse des images visuelles, mais de la recreation d'un état qui n'ait plus rien à envier à l'aliénation mentale....." (M 179) <sup>1</sup>

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1. This is another idea which seems to obsess Breton at this period of his life. His own experiences with patients at the "centre de neurologie" in Nantes and the psychiatric centre in Saint-Dizier during the war and possibly the Nadja affair - some time after he had stopped seeing Nadja, Breton discovered that she had been

(note continued on p.157)



It is the beginning of a new, major development of Surrealism. Breton is quite adamant: he is going to impose on the movement this new orientation, for he states, in capital letters:

"JE DEMANDE L'OCCULTATION PROFONDE, VERITABLE DU SURREALISME."  
(M 181)

He appears to be coining a new meaning for the word "occultation": there is no indication that he is thinking either of the basic conventional, astronomical sense, the "disparition passagère (d'un astre) par l'interposition d'un astre apparemment plus grand" (Robert) or of the much rarer one, the action of certain birds which disappear for a period. Instead he is inventing a meaning based on the idea of "rendre occulte" or referring to the occult sciences. Breton is therefore practising what he preached in Les mots sans rides, not allowing himself to be shackled by a basic dictionary meaning.

In a footnote Breton immediately gives his answer to the inevitable question: how did he propose to bring about this "occultation"?:

".... je pense qu'il y aurait tout intérêt à ce que nous pussions une reconnaissance sérieuse du côté de ces sciences à divers égards aujourd'hui complètement décriés que sont l'astrologie, entre toutes les anciennes, la métapsychique (spécialement en ce qui concerne l'étude de la cryptesthésie) parmi les modernes. Il ne s'agit que d'aborder ces sciences avec le minimum de défiance nécessaire et il suffit pour cela, dans les deux cas, de se faire une idée précise, positive, du calcul des probabilités."  
(M 181, note 1.)

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(note from page 156 continued) taken to a mental hospital in Vaucluse - lead Breton, in collaboration with Paul Eluard, to write in 1930 the curious book, L'Immaculée Conception, in which the two authors attempt to simulate the states of a number of mental disorders. Just as he had earlier tried to break down the barriers between conscious and subconscious thought by means of automatic writing, now Breton tries to do likewise for madness and reason.

The discussion is not carried very far here, at least as far as its potential connection with the question of the image is concerned, apart from one sentence which refers to the "jeux surréalistes" or "jeux de société", now mentioned in relation to telepathy:

"Toujours est-il que de très frappants rapports s'établissent de cette manière, que de remarquables analogies se déclarent, qu'un facteur inexplicable d'irréfutabilité intervient le plus souvent, et qu'à tout prendre c'est là un des lieux de rencontres les plus extraordinaires." (M 182, continuation of M 181, note 1.)

The issue appears to be side-tracked, as Breton begins to write about the problem of Woman and the necessity to restore to the word "amour" its strict sense of the total attachment to one human being, based on the recognition of the truth "dans une âme et dans un corps", until he, rather curiously, brings the two issues together:

"Plus que jamais, puisqu'il s'agit ici des possibilités d'occultation du surréalisme, je me tourne vers ceux qui ne craignent pas de concevoir l'amour comme le lieu d'occultation idéale de toute pensée." (M 183, continuation of M 181, note 1.)

The "cosmic" furnace of the alchemists was supposed to symbolize, after all, the conjunction of the male and female principles, which would give rise to the "philosopher's stone."<sup>1</sup>

Although in the same footnote Breton goes on to mention the significance of the fact that he, Aragon and Eluard were all born at the time of the conjunction of Uranus with Saturn, and although Breton quotes in the final pages of the Second Manifeste the Third and Fourth books of Magic, the "occultation" of Surrealism is not discussed here explicitly with reference to imagery, and there is little indication in Breton's writings of the 1930's that it is a

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1. v. Bessy, M., A Pictorial History of Magic and the Supernatural, (trans. by M. Crosland and A. Daventry), London - New York - Sydney - Toronto: Spring Books, English edition 1964, p.97.

particularly important feature of Surrealism in that decade, unless one simply relates the concept of the alchemy of the verb to the principle of "occultation" (v. the chapter on Le revolver à cheveux blancs).

In an interview granted to Jean Carteret and Roger Knabe in April, 1954, and published in Astrologie moderne, No. 12, oct.- nov.-déc. 1954, Breton reveals that he learned the rudiments of astrology in 1927, and adds:

"Par la suite, Pierre Mabilie m'a fait quelque peu bénéficier de sa grande connaissance du sujet et m'a entr'ouvert Fludd, pour me permettre de passer outre à l'affligeante médiocrité de la plupart des traités modernes. D'une manière générale, les Surréalistes ont considéré l'astrologie avec un vif intérêt, mais surtout sous l'angle poétique et sans s'y aventurer bien loin." (PC 47) <sup>1</sup>

As will be seen in the final part of this study, one can perhaps detect some hermetic motifs in Breton's poems in the 1930's, and Anna Balakian claims that hermeticism is an important feature of Breton's imagery as early as 1924, for she writes thus of Poisson soluble:

"The most consistent frame of reference one can detect is hermeticism: references to the magic fountain, the eagle and the Chameleon, Prometheus and other rebus analogies, the struggle between the eagle with its volatile celestial nature and the lion, the earth force, fixed and solid." <sup>2</sup>

The call for the "occultation" of Surrealism, made in the Second Manifeste, does not appear to displace the arbitrary image from its position at the centre of Breton's poetics in the 1930's, and indeed, as we shall see shortly, Breton will link the two together, and the section on the "prose quartet" will show how the arbitrary

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1. Yet Victor Crastre, in André Breton (p.35) cites Adrienne Monnier's claim, made in her Souvenirs published in Le Littéraire (June 15, 1945), that as early as 1916 Breton was interested in occultism.
  2. Balakian, A., André Breton, p.66.



image itself becomes an interesting leitmotif and a point of reference in those works.

Between 1924 and 1939 the basic theory of the image, formulated in the Manifeste du Surréalisme, does not undergo any radical transformation. It appears to remain the cornerstone of Breton's poetics, even though the dream-narration and automatic writing may be reassessed from time to time. The demand for the "occultation" of Surrealism does not affect the situation, at least in the 1930's. Yet occasionally and discreetly Breton is beginning to suggest in his writings the importance of the workings of analogy; and, as will be seen in Parts II and III, he will begin to seek out analogies and will no longer be content merely to record in automatic texts the images dictated by subconscious thought. As he grows older, Breton speaks more and more in terms of the analogical process, so much so that at times one suspects that the arbitrary image may have been displaced from its former dominant position in Breton's poetics. Though he will still proclaim the merits of the arbitrary image and though such images constantly continue to appear in his poetry, the emphasis seems to be placed, in Breton's theoretical texts of the 1940's and 1950's, on the concept of analogy. Of course, the two terms, arbitrary image and analogy, are by no means opposites: the arbitrariness of the metaphor is rarely total; there is usually some ground, some affinity, some analogical quality linking the two terms; the arbitrary image is simply one where there is the maximum degree of surprise. As Bergson has pointed out:

"On chercherait vainement, en effet, deux idées qui n'aient pas entre elles quelque trait de ressemblance ou ne se touchent pas par quelque côté. S'agit-il de ressemblance? Si profondes que soient les différences qui séparent deux images, on trouvera

toujours, en remontant assez haut, un genre commun auquel elles appartiennent, et par conséquent une ressemblance qui leur serve de trait d'union." <sup>1</sup>

Yet one has the impression of a latent and occasionally an overt struggle in Breton's writings between the arbitrary image and analogy, or at least that Breton is changing his terminology somewhat.

In the remaining chapters of this section the discussion will revolve around this impression of a struggle between the arbitrary image and analogy, or of a shift of emphasis from the former to the latter. Perhaps the clearest indication of this shift is found in a short text, Signe Ascendant, reference to which has been made already to show that it is in this text that Breton makes a reassessment of the simile and distinguishes clearly between the "image" (the metaphor and the simile) and the traditional "figures" of rhetoric. (v. supra, p.76).

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1. Matière et Mémoire, p.178.

## CHAPTER SIX

### "SIGNE ASCENDANT"

This text opens with a statement of the importance Breton attaches to analogy:

"Je n'ai jamais éprouvé le plaisir intellectuel que sur le plan analogique. Pour moi, la seule évidence au monde est commandée par le rapport spontané, extra-lucide, insolent qui s'établit dans certaines conditions, entre telle chose et telle autre, que le sens commun retiendrait de confronter. Aussi vrai que le mot le plus haïssable me paraît être le mot donc, avec tout ce qu'il entraîne de vanité et de délectation morose, j'aime éperdument tout ce qui, rompant d'aventure le fil de la pensée discursive, part soudain en fusée illuminant une vie de relations autrement féconde, dont tout indique que les hommes des premiers âges eurent le secret." (SA 7)

Admittedly Breton knows that the rocket soon falls to earth again, but in its brief flight, it affords a glimpse of the "vie de relations autrement féconde" which fascinates him. Once more Breton refers to the analogical process in terms of a lost secret: he feels that analogy alone can re-establish primordial contacts: hence the importance he attaches to utterances he finds particularly illuminating:

"Le diamant et le cochon sont hiéroglyphes de la 13<sup>e</sup> passion (harmonisme) que les civilisés n'éprouvent pas.

Charles Fourier.

Sur le lit du blanc de l'oeil, l'iris est le sommier du matelas de la pupille, où un fantôme de nous-même s'étend dans le rêve.

Malcolm de Chazal." (SA 8-9)

A rational interpretation can easily be found, of course, for Chazal's image, but Fourier's sentence appears to contribute a better example of the brief flash of illumination to which Breton has been alluding, and the use of the word "hiéroglyphes" brings out the symbolic quality present in the analogy, and makes us realize that analogy is an integral part of symbol as well as of metaphor; it is a reminder, too, that Breton's use of analogy, like that of



the Symbolists remote from logic, will be very private. Breton is quick to distinguish, however, between "l'analogie poétique" and "l'analogie mystique", once he has pointed out their resemblance:

"L'analogie poétique a ceci de commun avec l'analogie mystique qu'elle transgresse les lois de la déduction pour faire appréhender à l'esprit l'interdépendance de deux objets de pensée situés sur des plans différents, entre lesquels le fonctionnement logique de l'esprit n'est apte à jeter aucun pont et s'oppose a priori à ce que toute espèce de pont soit jeté. L'analogie poétique diffère foncièrement de l'analogie mystique en ce qu'elle ne présuppose nullement, à travers la trame du monde visible, un univers invisible qui tend à se manifester. Elle est tout empirique dans sa démarche, seul en effet l'empirisme pouvant lui assurer la totale liberté de mouvement nécessaire au bond qu'elle doit fournir. Considérée dans ses effets, il est vrai que l'analogie poétique semble, comme l'analogie mystique, militer en faveur de la conception d'un monde ramifié à perte de vue et tout entier parcouru de la même sève mais elle se maintient sans aucune contrainte dans le cadre sensible, voire sensuel, sans marquer aucune propension à verser dans le surnaturel. Elle tend à faire entrevoir et valoir la vraie vie 'absente' et pas plus qu'elle ne puise dans la rêverie métaphysique sa substance, elle ne songe un instant à faire tourner ses conquêtes à la gloire d'un quelconque 'au-delà'." (SA 9)

Meschonnic sees in Breton's claim for the poetic analogy in this essay the originality of the Surrealists vis-à-vis the problem of poetic diction:

"Cette analogie est plus vaste que l'analogie aristotélicienne, romantique, symboliste. Non seulement elle est logiquement plus compréhensive, incluant la différence et la contradiction, et n'est plus comprise comme ornement (elle ne vise ni la clarté, ni l'agrément, ni la surprise pour elle-même), — mais elle est création de la fable, rencontre littéraire, rencontre et littéralité. La poésie cesse d'être figure, métaphore au sens traditionnel, sans cesser d'être poésie." <sup>1</sup>

Yet both in theory and in practice, particularly in the second half of his career, Breton's writings are not too far removed from the Symbolism which provided his adolescent inspiration — if one thinks of its basic analogical method in addition to its reliance on the symbol —, but Breton evolves a symbolism stripped of its manifest

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1. Pour la poésie, pp.108-109.

metaphysical dimension.

It is at this point in the essay that Breton re-establishes the simile:

"Au terme actuel des recherches poétiques il ne saurait être fait grand état de la distinction purement formelle qui a pu être établie entre la métaphore et la comparaison. Il reste que l'une et l'autre constituent le véhicule interchangeable de la pensée analogique et que si la première offre des ressources de fulgurance, la seconde (qu'on en juge par les 'beaux comme' de Lautréamont) présente de considérables avantages de suspension." (SA 10)

It is consistent with Breton's earlier thinking that he should now play down the difference of form between the metaphor and the simile. Then he makes his remark that compared with these the other "figures of rhetoric" are completely devoid of interest. Whether or not the word "comme" is pronounced, it is the "déclic analogique" alone which fascinates him. He continues to pin his hopes on the image:

"Aussi repousserons-nous dédaigneusement le grief ignare qu'on fait à la poésie de ce temps d'abuser de l'image et l'appellerons-nous, sous ce rapport, à une luxuriance toujours plus grande." (ibid.)

Yet although Breton cites again Reverdy's famous law: "Plus les rapports des deux réalités rapprochées seront lointains et justes, plus l'image sera forte - plus elle aura de puissance émotive et de réalité poétique", the emphasis in the discussion is nevertheless placed now on the analogical method, supplanted from the Renaissance onwards according to Breton, by "la méthode 'logique' ". Breton sees the first duty of poets and artists as the restoration of the analogical method, which he feels had been held in honour in antiquity and in the medieval era, on condition that they rescue it from the clutches of Spiritualism. However, although Breton believes that "Reverdy's law" is indispensable, he feels that it is not entirely

adequate, and so he adds a supplementary requirement:

"Qu'on y prenne garde: l'image analogique, dans la mesure où elle se borne à éclairer, de la plus vive lumière, des similitudes partielles, ne saurait se traduire en termes d'équation. Elle se meut, entre les deux réalités en présence, dans un sens déterminé, qui n'est aucunement réversible."

(SA 11-12)

From the examples Breton cites, ranging from Reverdy, Baudelaire, Apollinaire and Péret, to Swedenborg, the Song of Songs and the "Paroles de la 3<sup>e</sup> âme, Egypte", one might be tempted to ask oneself how they differ from the "surrealist images" listed in the Manifeste du Surréalisme. There is indeed little point in seeking purely formal differences. The shift of emphasis from "arbitrary image" to "analogical image" casts light, however, on a fundamental secret of Breton's method of composition, not to mention his manner of thinking. The whole structure of his writing is based on an analogical approach: this will be seen in the prose-works, Nadja, Les Vases communicants, L'Amour fou and Arcane 17, as in the poems in free verse, but Breton becomes more overtly aware of this fact as he grows older, and he gradually explores the workings of analogy and seeks out analogies in an attempt, if not to solve life's problems, at least to bring himself consolation when faced with them.

The appreciation by Breton of hitherto unexpected relationships was not restricted to the domain of metaphor, but pervaded his whole way of life: it is inherent in the theme of "le hasard objectif", in Breton's method of dream-interpretation, in his peregrinations around the streets of Paris, in his search for unusual objects which may be put to a different use.

The emphasis on "analogy" adds a fresh dimension to Breton's poetics and integrates it more closely still with the rest of his



thought: it relates imagery inextricably to the "occultation" of Surrealism demanded in the Second Manifeste and which was already growing ever more important in his writings.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### ANALOGY AND THE "OCCULTATION" OF SURREALISM (1940-1966).

The change of emphasis from the "arbitrary image" to "analogy" is clearly a result of the importance Breton attaches in the 1940's and 1950's to hermetic philosophy. Almost every major text Breton writes during this period contains some reference to some aspect of occultism. Even in the Anthologie de l'humour noir,<sup>1</sup> which contains extracts from the works of a number of writers whom Breton considers to be the most interesting exponents of black humour and Breton's introduction both to the subject in general and to each author quoted, there is an allusion to analogy. In the article Breton devotes to Charles Fourier, he mentions the somewhat condescending attitude of Baudelaire towards the social visionary who inspires the last of Breton's long poems:

"Baudelaire s'est montré, à deux reprises, fort étroit dans sa manière de considérer Fourier sans vouloir lui rendre les honneurs auxquels il a droit. 'Fourier, écrit-il dans l'Art romantique, est venu un jour, trop pompeusement, nous révéler les mystères de l'analogie. Je ne nie pas la valeur de quelques-unes de ses minutieuses découvertes, bien que je croie que son cerveau était trop épris d'exactitude matérielle pour ne pas commettre d'erreurs et pour atteindre d'emblée la certitude morale de l'intuition..... D'ailleurs Swedenborg, qui possédait une âme bien plus grande (?) nous avait déjà enseigné que le ciel est un très grand homme; que tout, forme, mouvement, nombre, parfum, dans le spirituel comme dans le naturel, est significatif, réciproque, converse, correspondant.' (Tout le contexte est à relire). Dans sa lettre du 21 janvier, 1856, à Alphonse Toussenel, son parti pris va jusqu'à lui faire contester, contre toute évidence, que le délicieux auteur du Monde des oiseaux doive quelque chose à Fourier .....'" (HN 88)

The implication is, of course, that Breton holds Fourier in much higher esteem than Baudelaire did, and that for Breton, Fourier

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1. Paris: Edns du Sagittaire, 1940; but this edition was suppressed by the Vichy Government. It came out in a revised and augmented form in 1950.

is a master, as far as analogy is concerned.

Furthermore, the article on Benjamin Péret in the Anthologie de l'humour noir alludes to his verbal alchemy:

"Lui seul a pleinement réalisé sur le verbe l'opération correspondante à la 'sublimation' alchimique qui consiste à provoquer l' 'ascension du subtil' par sa 'séparation d'avec l'épais'. L'épais, dans ce domaine, c'est cette croûte de signification exclusive dont l'usage a recouvert tous les mots et qui ne laisse pratiquement aucun jeu à leurs associations hors des cases où les confine par petits groupes l'utilité immédiate ou convenue, solidement étayée par la routine." (HN 505)

One is reminded, of course, of the essay Les mots sans rides, where, in addition, there is talk of a "verbal chemistry".

Basically, Martinique charmeuse de serpents<sup>1</sup> gives Breton's impressions of his short stay in Martinique in 1941 while he was on his way to the United States of America. Although he was regarded by the authorities there as undesirable and sent at first to a concentration camp, he was eventually allowed to live in Fort-de-France with his family. There he discovered by chance a copy of the review Tropiques and the next day met Aimé Césaire, one of its principal animators. In the chapter of Martinique charmeuse des serpents devoted to Aimé Césaire, Un grand poète noir, Breton evokes the poetry of his new friend in terms of the alchemy of the word:

".... la poésie de Césaire, comme toute grande poésie et tout grand art, vaut au plus haut point par le pouvoir de transmutation qu'elle met en oeuvre et qui consiste, à partir des matériaux les plus déconsidérés parmi lesquels il faut compter les laideurs et les servitudes mêmes, à produire on sait assez que ce n'est plus l'or la pierre philosophale, mais bien la liberté." <sup>2</sup>

And he appears to imply that Césaire's lyricism is natural and spontaneous, impossible to pin down to precisely definable devices:

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1. (with text of André Masson) Paris: Editions du Sagittaire, 1948.
  2. Breton, A., Martinique charmeuse de serpents, Paris: Pauvert, 1972, pp.103-4.



"Le don du chant, la capacité de refus, le pouvoir de transmutation spéciale dont il vient de s'agir, il serait par trop vain de vouloir les ramener à un certain nombre de secrets techniques." <sup>1</sup>

In 1942, while he was in New York, Breton wrote Prolégomènes à un Troisième Manifeste du Surréalisme ou non. Although he seems concerned with lamenting the deterioration of great and significant ideas as soon as they become public property and with attacking the exploitation of man by man and of man by God, Breton can see a credit side to recent developments: the interest taken in the art of New Guinea, the emergence of the poet Aimé Césaire, and also the following tendency:

"Mais je pourrais aussi faire état d'un certain retour qui s'opère au cours de cette guerre à l'étude de la philosophie du Moyen Âge aussi bien que des sciences 'maudites' (avec lesquelles un contact tacite a toujours été maintenu par l'intermédiaire de la poésie 'maudite'." (M 303)

After Breton has attacked the notion that man is the king of creation, he closes the text with a section in italics entitled "Les Grands Transparents", in which he quotes both Novalis: "Nous vivons en réalité dans un animal dont nous sommes les parasites. La constitution de cet animal détermine la nôtre et vice versa" (M 308) and William James: "Qui sait si, dans la nature, nous ne tenons pas une aussi petite place auprès d'êtres par nous insoupçonnés, que nos chats et nos chiens vivant à nos côtés dans nos maisons?" (*ibid.*)

Such thoughts occur to Breton as he meditates on phenomena such as cyclones and wars. Rather than dismiss them in the manner of the rationalist Breton keeps an open mind, and it is this attitude which determines both his belief in analogy and his desire to bring about the "occultation" of Surrealism.

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1. Breton, A., Martinique charmeuse de serpents, Paris: Pauvert, 1972, p.104.

The Entretiens, too, contain allusions to esoteric ideas. In addition to the sixteen radio interviews with André Parinaud the book contains the text of a number of other interviews given by Breton and published in various magazines during the period from 1941 to 1952. In these, also, Breton's interest in the occult, and the effect of this on his poetics, is revealed. In an interview granted to Jean Duché, Breton speaks of Fourier and the aspect of Fourier's thought which fascinated him most of all:

".... c'est son dessein de fournir une interprétation hiéroglyphique du monde, fondée sur l'analogie entre les passions humaines et les produits des trois règnes de la nature." (E 250)

Breton feels that Fourier here was making the cardinal junction of the main preoccupations of poetry and art since the beginning of the nineteenth century and the plans for social reorganisation which Breton feels run the risk of remaining at an embryonic stage unless they take into account these preoccupations.

When Aimé Patri asked him in an interview for the March 1948 edition of Paru what role he assigned to esoteric tradition, Breton gave the following reply:

"De plus en plus considérable, n'en déplaise à ces bons apôtres qui s'inquiètent hypocritement à mon sujet. Observez, cher Aimé Patri, que tout ce qui s'est dit de mieux en France depuis la Libération (Libération larvée s'il en fût) tend à l'élucidation, longtemps différée, des liens qui font participer de la démarche occulte les conceptions modernes de la poésie, de la révolution et de l'amour. ....Quelle resituation de la pensée depuis lors (le début du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle), et surtout depuis cette dernière guerre. Et quelle revanche pour l'occultisme, qui en a fait presque tous les frais. Remarquez qu'il s'agit à peine de savoir si véritablement une tradition stricte, écrite ou orale, a pu s'étendre plus ou moins secrètement de l'antiquité à nos jours (bien que ce soit là l'objection persistante du vulgaire), mais bien de démêler si les oeuvres qui continuent à nous influencer entretiennent avec cette tradition même impure, des rapports appréciables ou non." (E 259-260)

Breton feels that the issue was settled as far as Hugo, Nerval, Baudelaire, Lautréamont and Jarry are concerned and that it would soon

be the case with Fourier and Mallarmé.

When Claudine Chonez suggests to him that he appears to believe more and more in a magic or poetic "key" and in love as the law of the universe, not simply a human invention, Breton in his reply observes:

"... Malcolm de Chazal, aujourd'hui, voit dans la volupté le lien d'interférence de la naissance et de la mort, le point idéal d'où ces deux phénomènes confondants supportent d'être appréhendés. Il se pourrait.

Quant à l'idée d'une clef 'hiéroglyphique' du monde, elle pré-existe plus ou moins consciemment à toute haute poésie, que seule peut mouvoir le principe des analogies et correspondances. Des poètes comme Hugo, Nerval, Baudelaire, Rimbaud, des penseurs comme Fourier, partagent cette idée avec les occultistes, et aussi vraisemblablement avec la plupart des inventeurs scientifiques." (E 267)

Furthermore, Breton remained convinced that in man "la pensée mythique" continues to proceed along a route parallel to that of rational thought.

Francis Dumont asked Breton both what he had looked for and what he was still looking for from esotericism. In reply Breton repeats that he had on a number of occasions stressed the interest poets had taken in esoteric thought from the beginning of the nineteenth century to the present day and that because Surrealism obeys certain historical determinants, it could not fail to come up against it in its turn, but he insists:

"Mais c'est de son propre mouvement, je veux dire porté par des mobiles qui me semblaient alors strictement poétiques, qu'il a été amené à 'recouper' certaines thèses ésotériques fondamentales." (E 270)

Thus before the war the emphasis was on strictly poetic matters, but Breton acknowledges that the Promethean mission assigned to poetry by Rimbaud gave it a preoccupation with the need for a "révolution intérieure", the perfect accomplishment of which could be identical to that of the Great Work. By 1950, Breton



feels that esotericism is the system which has most to give to man whom he sees confronted with the "énigme des mythes".

When José M. Valverde asked him in September of that year what his immediate projects were, Breton makes an interesting confession of a dilemma:

"Je n'ai renoncé à creuser plus avant pour savoir si le surréalisme rejoint véritablement la pensée traditionnelle - disons celle de Swedenborg, de Fabre d'Olivet - jusqu'à se confondre finalement avec elle ou si elle ne présente avec celle-ci que des points d'intersection." (E 284)

Perhaps the simplest way out of this dilemma is suggested not by Breton but by Anna Balakian, when she distinguishes between two aspects of hermeticism, the Closed Book, - supposed to contain those mysteries never to be revealed to man - and the Open Book, "the realm of the marvellous or of revelation"<sup>1</sup>:

"But too often and too carelessly the two outlooks are taken as a single manifestation of mysticism and their reflection in poetry as a continuous chain in the history of poetics. They are, rather, opposite faces of the poetic coin. Correspondences imply a dualistic concept of the universe. During our sojourn here on earth certain emblems of nature give intimations of another plane of existence, and as we saunter along the pathways of our forest we recognize signs of a possible transcendence..... What Rimbaud proposes, what Raymond Roussel does in a rather literally hermetic sense, and what Breton translates into a new set of poetic images, are based on a monistic view of the universe, in which essence and substance become one, the material entity provokes ecstasy not through a rising motion but through rotation and metamorphosis. The universe is not an octave but, as André Breton suggests, 'a great circuit'." <sup>2</sup>

This is perhaps the crucial point, and though Breton may not make it in so direct a manner, the fact that he continually insists on the difference between spiritualism and Surrealism is an indication that he would have accepted it.

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1. v. Balakian, A., André Breton, p.129.

2. ibid., pp.129-130.

References to analogy and to occultism continue to be found in La Clé des Champs, the next collection of Breton's essays, articles and prefaces, which came out in 1953. In Devant le rideau, the catalogue to the Surrealist exhibition of 1947, a central theme of which was the esoteric implications of Surrealism, Breton states once more his basic point:

"Ce n'est sans doute pas non plus par hasard que des recherches récentes ont abouti à déceler, aux noeuds des lignes de pensée poétique et d'anticipation sociale - les grands Conventionnels, Hugo, Nerval, Fourier - la persistante vitalité d'une conception ésotérique du monde - Martinès, Saint-Martin, Fabre d'Olivet, l'abbé Constant ..... A la lumière des travaux dont il s'agit, il apparaît probable et l'avenir ne tardera sans doute pas à démontrer que cette conception influence de façon plus ou moins directe les grands poètes de la seconde moitié du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle (Lautréamont, Rimbaud, Mallarmé, Jarry) cependant qu'elle se cristallise à nouveau chez Saint-Yves d'Alveydre." (CC 111-112)

In another text dating from the same year, Comète surréaliste, Breton stresses yet again that:

"L'initiation par la poésie, par l'art - à laquelle les dernières recherches sur Hugo, sur Nerval, sur Rimbaud et sur d'autres nous donnent les plus sérieuses raisons d'adapter les schèmes ésotériques - est tout ce à quoi le surréalisme reste dédié." (CC 125)

It is important to note here, however, that Breton speaks of the adaptation of esoteric schemes and indicates that the initiation is by poetry and art, thus implying that they follow a parallel course to that of hermeticism and are not to be identified with it. It is perhaps a little paradoxically that Breton detects analogies between Surrealism and hermeticism in the fact that both are based to a considerable degree on the principle of analogy. Furthermore, Breton continues to discuss the work of the new poets he appreciates in terms of verbal alchemy and to relate their private poetic quest to the quest for the philosopher's stone. This is the essence of his article on Magloire-Saint-Aude:

"Douze à 15 vers, pas davantage, je comprends votre désir: la pierre philosophale ou presque, la note inouïe qui dompte le tumulte, la dent unique où la roue d'angoisse engrène sur l'extase....." (CC 131)

Furthermore, this final reference to the moment when the anguish of the martyr is transformed into ecstasy exemplifies again the fusion of opposites and points to the latent analogies between the two states.

Numerous references to hermeticism are, as one might expect, to be found in L'Art magique which Breton brought out in 1957 in collaboration with Gérard Legrand. In accordance with its title, this book is basically a history of art and a kind of art-criticism, but one passage in particular is of interest for the study of Breton's ideas on the image: it is taken from L. Chochod's Histoire de la Magie et de ses dogmes:<sup>1</sup>

"La théorie générale sur laquelle se fonde la magie comprend une partie secondaire se rapportant en principe à un monde stellaire quelconque mais, dans la plupart de ses applications, au monde terrestre. C'est la 'théorie des correspondances' ..... La magie infère que, dans le monde terrestre, chaque être possède une structure dont les caractères spécifiques sont le résultat des diverses combinaisons de l'énergie cosmique localisées en lui. Par exemple, entre un morceau de cuivre, un brin de verveine et une colombe il y a des différences d'organisation, de forme, de densité, etc..... Ces objets, si dissimilaires en apparence, n'en sont pas moins le siège d'un dynamisme latent chez le minéral; mobile, actif et, jusqu'à un certain point intelligent, chez l'animal, mais de même sorte." 2

Breton is quick to quote any justification of the basic principles of analogy, ever ready to exploit even the most latent similarities between apparently dissimilar things and to erode the frontiers between animal, vegetable and mineral erected by the rationalists.

In 1970, to complete the series begun by Les Pas perdus,

1. Paris: Payot, 1949.

2. In Breton, A., Legrand, G., L'Art magique, p.15.



Point du Jour and La Clé des Champs, a final collection of Breton's essays, articles, prefaces, replies to interviews, covering the final part of his career from 1952 to 1966, was published with the title Perspective cavalière.<sup>1</sup>

In the interview with Jean Carteret and Roger Knabe Breton was asked:

"Que pensez-vous de l'astrologie comme langue d'or de l'analogie, ce que seraient à la musique, le contrepoint et l'harmonie?"  
(PC 48)

to which he gave the following reply:

"Je dois partiellement me récuser faute de vocabulaire musical. Que l'astrologie soit 'la langue d'or' de l'analogie, celle qui tend à permettre les plus grands échanges entre l'homme et la nature en établissant entre eux un réseau de localisations qui se correspondent, je ne saurais y contredire. Rien ne révèle, en effet, plus ardente aspiration à l'harmonie (au sens où Fourier entendit ce mot)."

In an article entitled Le Surréalisme et la tradition, dated the 31st May, 1956, Breton, writing once again about the origins of Surrealism, reveals that he was struck very quickly by the "analogies de texture" between what automatic writing was beginning to disclose and the basis of occultist philosophy. When this discovery was reinforced by the realization that the men whom Breton regarded as the great French poets of the previous hundred years likewise were influenced by the esoteric tradition, Breton felt that:

"Tout se passe comme si la haute poésie et ce qu'on nomme la 'haute science' marquerait un cheminement parallèle et se prêtaient un mutuel appui." (PC 128)

Breton in this article stresses again, however, that the Surrealists, for whom the desire for the liberation of poetry as of life is a prime necessity, could not let any form of orthodoxy, even "traditional" orthodoxy, take away any part of their freedom.

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1. The material was gathered together by Marguerite Bonnet.

Breton's final words on the subject of the "occultation" of Surrealism are found in his "Entretien avec Guy Dumur" (1964) (v. supra, p.6).

None of the above quotations by Breton really gets to the heart of the matter, however; he does not examine in detail the concept of analogy. All they prove is that Breton was obsessed during the period in question with the conviction that all the great French poets of the past hundred years or so had taken an interest in, or had been inspired by, esoteric tradition, and that there was accordingly nothing unusual in his desire to bring about the "occultation" of Surrealism. His case relies largely on the fact that both Surrealism and occultism attach considerable importance to the process of analogy and on his feeling that there is something magical in the creation of a work of art, that the creation of a work of art is a kind of initiation. Though the above quotations may help to prepare the reader for the presence of allusions to hermeticism in Breton's poetry and to make him aware of the analogical process at work there, they do little else. They constitute neither a detailed study of occultism nor an exploration in depth of possible links between Surrealist poetry and occultism at the level of precise and particular themes, motifs or symbols. Breton is able, however, to be more precise when he discusses the links between hermeticism and modern poetry at the level of word-play.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### SURREALIST AND OCCULTIST WORD-PLAY

Breton eventually gets round to a discussion of the connection between Surrealist word-play and the esoteric rebus, when he writes about Raymond Roussel in Fronton-virage. Breton refers to "cette nécessité" qu'il (Roussel) se créait d'employer certaines combinaisons phonétiques" (CC 232) and to Roussel's somewhat obscure ambition to give a new impulsion to thought by a systematic compromising of language, starting with the exploitation of the ambiguity present in the sound of certain words. Breton knows that there is nothing particularly original in this and, to illustrate his point, he cites Charles Cros' couplet:

"Dans ces meubles laqués, rideaux et dais moroses,  
Danse, aime, bleu laquais, ris d'oser des mots roses!"

Breton claims, however, that this aspect of poetry was sounded most thoroughly at the beginning of this century by Roussel and Brisset, though, in a footnote, he refers to Duchamp's "jeux de mots", to Rose Sélavy by Desnos, and to the "collateral branch" supplied by Leiris: Glossaire: j'y serre mes gloses.

Breton then makes the vital observation:

"Mais, dans son extraordinaire déploiement, tel que nous l'observons chez Roussel ou chez Brisset, le 'jeu de mots' ne saurait, à beaucoup près, se voir assigner une carrière exclusivement poétique. Ouvrons, en effet, un ouvrage ésotérique. Qu'y lisons-nous à son propos? 'A cette époque (les trois derniers siècles du moyen âge), l'esprit populaire, tout imprégné de mysticisme oriental, se complaisait dans le rébus, le voile symbolique, l'expression allégorique ..... Les 'hostelleries' arboraient souvent un lion doré figé dans une pose héraldique, ce qui, pour le pérégrinant en quête de logis, signifiait qu'on 'y pouvait coucher', grâce au double sens de l'image: au lit on dort.... (De nos jours) à peine remarque-t-on, de temps à autre, une application régulière, mais fréquemment orientée vers un but de réclame, de cet art déchu. C'est ainsi qu'une grande firme moderne, spécialisée dans la construction de machines à coudre, adopta pour sa publicité une



affiche fort connue. [Elle représente une femme assise, travaillant à la machine, au centre d'une S majestueuse. On y voit surtout l'initiale du fabricant, quoique le rébus soit clair et de sens transparent: cette femme coud dans sa grossesse, ce qui est une allusion à la douceur du mécanisme'] (FULCANELLI, Les Demeures Philosophales, pp.34-5)..... Nous sommes ici au coeur de ce qu'on appelle la langue des oiseaux 'idiome phonétique basé uniquement sur l'assonance'. Il importe de retenir que l'usage de cette langue est essentiellement de nécessité cabalistique: on recourt à elle pour désigner telle communication qu'on veut faire parvenir à certains êtres privilégiés tout en égarant le commun des mortels." (CC 233-234)

Breton is convinced that Roussel in La Poussière de Soleils set out to provide us with the rudiments of what alchemists understand by the Great Work and that he used eventually the sole means allowed by tradition. Breton again cites Fulcanelli, whom he regarded as the highest modern authority on the matter:

"Notre intention se borne à éveiller la sagacité de l'investigateur, le mettant à même d'acquérir, par un effort personnel, cet enseignement secret dont les plus sincères auteurs n'ont jamais voulu découvrir les éléments. Tous leurs traités étant acroamatiques, il est inutile d'espérer en obtenir la moindre indication, quant à la base et au fondement de l'art. C'est la raison pour laquelle nous nous efforçons, dans la mesure du possible, de rendre utiles ces ouvrages scellés, en fournissant la matière de ce qui constituait jadis l'initiation première, c'est-à-dire la révélation verbale indispensable pour les comprendre." (CC 237-238)

This leads Breton to mention the reasons on which he bases his conviction about Roussel:

"Observons d'abord que la mise en scène de La Poussière de Soleils suppose 22 changements de décors (22: soit le nombre de signes de l'alphabet hébreu, ou des 'sentiers' reliant les Séphiroth de la Cabale, ou des arcanes majeurs du tarot). Mais reprenons au départ la chaîne même, en précisant que les quelques suggestions qui suivent sont aussi peu limitatives que possible (d'ailleurs très insuffisamment réunies et sans aucun doute entachées de maladresses)." (CC 238)

Unfortunately the kind of word-play, exploiting homonymy, which one finds in the work of Roussel, belongs to Breton's early career, even to his pre-Surrealist poetry. In addition, though Breton's later poems are full of references to the esoteric tradition and to its

modern adherents and though the structure of the long poems is particularly interesting, they do not possess the numerical symbolism found in La Poussière de Soleils.

It is significant that Breton does not quote the post-war work of any member of the Surrealist group to illustrate this particular link, at the level of word-play, he detects between occultism and modern poetry, and in Devant le rideau he leaves it to contemporary occultists to assess the extent to which certain modern writers - Roussel, Brisset, Jarry, Kafka, Rimbaud, Duchamp, Desnos - were influenced by esoteric traditions.

One post-war discovery which does approach the potential conflict between the arbitrary image and analogy from a fresh angle, however, was the "jeu de l'un dans l'autre".

## CHAPTER NINE

### "L'UN DANS L'AUTRE"

Breton first described the circumstances in which the "jeu de l'un dans l'autre" was conceived and born in the second and third numbers of the "nouvelle série" of the review Médium (the February and May issues, 1954).<sup>1</sup> Breton's account runs as follows:

"La brève illumination qui, au bout de quelques mois, allait donner essor au jeu de 'l'un dans l'autre' et nous mettre en possession de la certitude capitale qui me semble en découler me fut donnée vers mars 1953 au café de la place Blanche un soir qu'entre mes amis et moi la discussion portait, une fois de plus, sur l'analogie. En quête d'un exemple pour faire valoir ce que je défendais, j'en vins à dire que le lion pouvait être aisément décrit à partir de l'allumette que je m'apprêtais à frotter. Il m'apparut en effet, sur-le-champ, que la flamme en puissance dans l'allumette 'donnerait' en pareil cas la crinière et qu'il suffirait, à partir de là, de très peu de mots tendant à différencier, à particulariser l'allumette pour mettre le lion sur pied. Le lion est dans l'allumette, de même que l'allumette est dans le lion.

L'idée que n'importe quel objet est ainsi 'contenu' dans n'importe quel autre, qu'il suffit de singulariser celui-ci en quelques traits (touchant la substance, la couleur, la structure, les dimensions) pour obtenir celui-là, cette idée dut poursuivre en moi son cheminement souterrain puisque, le 29 juillet, nous en vinmes, Péret et moi, à reconsidérer de plus près la question. C'était en fin d'après-midi à Saint-Cirq-la-Popie, tout en haut du village, si bien que, redescendant, lui et moi, nous nous trouvions à la recherche d'exemples vérificatifs. La spéculation avait été assez excitante pour nous faire brûler les étapes et passer à l'extrême des possibilités, d'où à ce moment notre remarquable euphorie. Nous n'en étions déjà plus à penser que tout objet peut se décrire à partir de tout autre, mais encore toute action, et aussi tout personnage, même placé dans une situation déterminée, à partir de tout objet, et inversement. C'est ce qui explique que les deux premiers exemples enregistrés aient été les suivants:

L'oeuf est une partie de cartes qui se joue avec des cartes de couleurs, non pas rouge et noire, mais jaune et blanche. Le jeu, sous peine d'interruption de la partie, ne doit pas être battu. Le gagnant, pourvu non de cheveux, mais de plumes, en sort mouillé et sa mère vient aussitôt le prendre en charge.

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1. The article has since been published in book form under the title L'Un dans l'Autre, Paris: Eric Losfeld, 1970; it also appears in Perspective cavalière, pp.50-61.



Le bouton de bottine est Victor Hugo le soir d'Hernani. Les réactions du public ne lui parviennent que sous forme de craquements. Il se tient à la porte de la salle de spectacle, regardant vers l'extérieur, avec plusieurs autres Victor Hugo alignés à côté de lui.

Nous convînmes sans tarder de donner la plus grande extension possible à la production de ces 'identités' qui pour se constituer nous paraissaient, dès ce moment, de nature et de force à déjouer tout obstacle en tous sens. Le plus simple pour cela était de faire passer le nouveau moyen - d'ordre télescopant - qui venait de s'offrir dans le cadre du jeu collectif. Rien n'était plus facile puisque nous étions de nombreux amis réunis à Saint-Cirq." (PC 52-54)

Breton then explains the rules of the "jeu de l'un dans l'autre":

"..... l'un de nous 'sortait' et devait décider, à part lui, de s'identifier à tel objet déterminé (disons, par exemple, un escalier). L'ensemble des autres devait convenir en son absence qu'il se présenterait comme un autre objet (par exemple une bouteille de champagne). Il devait se décrire en tant que bouteille de champagne, offrant des particularités telles qu'à l'image de cette bouteille vienne se superposer peu à peu, et cela jusqu'à s'y substituer, l'image de l'escalier. Ce faisant, il est bien entendu qu'il devait se maintenir en condition de pouvoir, explicitement ou non, commencer ses phrases par: 'Moi, bouteille de champagne.....' ou encore: 'Je suis une bouteille de champagne qui.....' Au cas où son monologue, de deux à cinq minutes, n'eût pas encore permis de deviner, l'auditoire était convié à poser des questions, pourvu que celles-ci ne versent pas dans le jeu du 'portrait' ". (PC 54-55)

Breton claims that in none of the three hundred or so games of "l'un dans l'autre", played with different participants, did they meet with a check, and sometimes the solution was found with an incredible rapidity.

It is interesting and significant that the only recognized "genre" into which Breton feels the "jeu de l'un dans l'autre" might be placed is "l'énigme",<sup>1</sup> and he quotes Huizinga's book, Homo Ludens,

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1. In L'Art magique, however, one finds the following reservation: "Ce jeu ne rentre guère dans celui de 'l'énigme' étudiée par Huizinga, parmi les jeux qui affirment 'au sens le plus élevé, le caractère supralogique de notre situation dans le cosmos.'" (p.16). This reservation is supported by Roger Caillois when he discusses "le jeu de l'un dans l'autre" in the chapter entitled L'Enigme et L'Image in his Art Poétique (Paris: Gallimard, 1958, p.154): "L'énigme est liturgique, immuable, alors que, dès le début, l'image poétique repose en partie au moins sur sa valeur de nouveauté, c'est-à-dire de choc. Dans un cas, il s'agit de savoir, dans l'autre de créer."

(which had been published in France in 1951), to indicate the particular relevance of such a classification:

"Huizinga, qui signale 'l'étroite corrélation de la poésie avec 'l'énigme', insiste sur l'importance du concours d'énigmes dans les cultes sacrificiels et sur le rôle capital qu'il joue dans la tradition védique, en particulier. Il se trouve donc que le jeu de 'l'un dans l'autre' nous offre fortuitement le moyen de remettre la poésie sur la voie sacrée qui fut originellement la sienne et d'où tout a conspiré par la suite à l'écarter .....'" (PC 55-56)

There is little evidence, however, that Breton ever wrote poems based on the "jeu de l'un dans l'autre". The examples, which have been recorded, may perhaps be considered as little image-poems in their own right, though they have never been described explicitly or published as such. On the other hand, the discovery that any object can be described in terms of any other object, however far apart they may appear to be at first sight, would have been to Breton a confirmation of the validity of the arbitrary image, if such a confirmation were really required. The arbitrary image throws together distant realities, but the "jeu de l'un dans l'autre" seems to prove that hitherto unsuspected links can always be found between them. Roger Caillois, for one, has difficulty in accepting this, and is unimpressed by the 100% success rate in the games played by Breton and his friends:

"La thèse d'André Breton est, au fond, que tout, strictement tout, en ce domaine, se trouve susceptible d'être ratifiée par l'imagination. Le mérite de l'image viendrait alors de sa nouveauté absolue, du caractère inédit, déconcertant et - à la lettre - in-imaginable du rapprochement. C'est là pure contradiction. Il importe au contraire que l'image demeure imaginable."<sup>1</sup>

Caillois' attitude is, of course, very similar to that of Reverdy. If, however, one could regard "le jeu de l'un dans l'autre" merely as a game, it would be easier to gloss over such problems, but

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1. Art poétique, p.161.

Breton takes great pains to stress its implications as far as imagery is concerned:

"Je voudrais, ici, m'en tenir à faire valoir le moyen d'élucidation sans précédent que nous offre le mécanisme de 'l'un dans l'autre' appliqué aux images poétiques qui nous semblent les plus hardies. J'en reprendrai pour modèles deux de celles que j'ai enchâssées dans 'Signe ascendant':

Ta langue  
Le poisson rouge dans le bocal  
De ta voix.

Supposons qu'Apollinaire, au jeu de 'l'un dans l'autre' se soit choisi comme la langue et qu'on lui ait imposé de se définir comme un poisson: que dira-t-il pour commencer, sinon qu'il est un poisson rouge? Où un tel poisson se prête-t-il communément à notre observation? Dans un bocal. Quel sera le correspondant de ce bocal pour la langue? De toute évidence la voix, à laquelle la qualité 'cristalline' est d'ailleurs prêtée par lieu-commun. On voit assez que cette image d'Apollinaire, si frappante qu'elle puisse être, exclut tout caprice de sa part.

Ta gorge qui s'avance et qui pousse la moire,  
Ta gorge triomphante est une belle armoire  
Dont les panneaux bombés et clairs  
Comme les boucliers accrochent les éclairs.

Supposons que Baudelaire, au jeu de 'l'un dans l'autre', se soit choisi comme la poitrine de celle qu'il aime et qu'on lui ait imposé de se définir comme une armoire: que fera-t-il (il doit avant tout combattre ici une idée pénible, dépréciative)? Il se trouvera dans l'obligation de rejeter vers l'extérieur le linge de l'armoire en le magnifiant et d'insister au possible sur l'aspect fastueux du meuble. Que dira-t-il des panneaux de l'armoire (qui seuls peuvent lui offrir un secours)? Ce que tout autre dirait à sa place: ils sont bombés et clairs. Encore faut-il que pour dessiner les seins à partir d'eux, il y ajoute les pointes (comme les boucliers) et donne à entendre qu'ils accrochent les éclairs du désir." (PC 56-57)

Breton feels that all the great "image-makers" of the modern era (Lautréamont, Rimbaud, Corbière, Cros, Nouveau, Jarry, Maeterlinck, Saint-Pol-Roux, Saint-John Perse, Reverdy, Malcolm de Chazal) could be put to this test. As for the two examples just quoted, however, one may well ask whether analysing them from the point of view of "l'un dans l'autre" really adds anything to a more orthodox interpretation: they were perfectly comprehensible, quite transparent, beforehand. Breton's analysis would have been more convincing if he had chosen much more arbitrary images, images from the



work of fellow-Surrealists. Moreover, images can be put to the scrutiny of "l'un dans l'autre" only if they are based exclusively on the juxtaposition of two terms. This is not always the case, as was seen in Breton's list of surrealist images in the first Manifeste. An obvious benefit, however, of the "jeu de l'un dans l'autre" in the process of image-creation is the fact that it necessitates the continual ramification of a basic image, and one has the impression at times that some of Breton's images consist of the ramification, the complex development, of a basic image, which is suppressed at some stage in the process, either at the subconscious or at the conscious level. The final words of Breton's article add a significant criterion:

"Le jeu de l'un dans l'autre' met en possession d'un critérium qui, en toute rigueur à cet égard, permettrait de distinguer ce qui s'est avéré pleinement viable de ce qui est resté (bien souvent) à l'état larvaire. Il devrait pouvoir rendre à la poésie le sens de l'immensité de ses pouvoirs perdus." (PC 57)

This rather challenging idea is left in the air, however. Breton does not say whether it should be applied when one is attempting to analyse surrealist imagery. It is possible that Breton in his enthusiasm at the time of its discovery attaches too much importance to the mechanism of "l'un dans l'autre".

In a second article, Incidences de 'L'UN DANS L'AUTRE', Breton mentions M. Jean Bruno's explanation of the 100% success rate of the game - Bruno points out that the circumstances in which it was played were particularly favourable to telepathy -, but of more immediate interest, as far as Breton's ideas on the image are concerned, are three situations which occurred in the course of the games and Breton's reactions to them:

"1° Sans objet. Exemple: on demande à Péret de se définir comme 'fenêtre' alors qu'il s'est précisément conçu comme 'fenêtre' (une telle coïncidence ne s'est produite qu'une fois).

2° Trop simple. Exemple: la 'noix de coco' appelée à se dépeindre comme 'grappe de raisin'. Leur rapprochement ne saurait faire image, mais développement - en platitude - d'une parallèle à l'échelle du fruit. Autre exemple: le 'seau' en tant que 'margelle de puits' (trop grande contiguïté au départ).

3° Dépressive, répugnante (à moins d'être conduite à très grandes guides). Exemple: l''aisselle' se présentant comme 'confiture de fraises'. Pour obvier à cet inconvénient majeur, d'un commun accord les joueurs se sont très vite interdit, de part et d'autre, l'appel à tout élément risquant d'impliquer référence principale à l'appareil digestif." (PC 63)

Obviously the first case is out of the question. The phrases, "the window is a window" and "the window is like a window" are not images and are totally devoid of interest. Though the second case occurs occasionally, both in poetry and in prose, it is of no interest to Breton, for, in his terminology, it would be a very weak image. The third case is different, however, and the nature of Breton's objection to it is different. It could be a source of humour, but the particular type of humour here seems repugnant to Breton, and it is interesting that although the form and style of Péret's poems are very reminiscent of those of Breton, what distinguishes the two poets and very close friends, in addition to the much greater violence and vehemence of Péret's work, is the great concentration of food-images in Péret's poems.

Even though one may question the value of the practical application of the "jeu de l'un dans l'autre" in Breton's poetry or to the study of Breton's poetry, nonetheless it adds an extra dimension to his ideas both on the arbitrary image and on analogy and reveals that the latter, particularly, was still at the centre of the Surrealists' preoccupations. New light is cast on both these apparent rivals for the predominant place in Breton's poetics in the

final part of his career by the mechanism of "l'un dans l'autre",  
but the solution is really provided by Du surréalisme en ses oeuvres  
vives. (1953)



## CHAPTER TEN

### THE RESTORATION OF THE SURREALIST IMAGE: "DU SURREALISME EN SES OEUVRES VIVES"

The first part of this brief text, which is, in fact, yet another Surrealist manifesto, and as such is included in the NRF Idées and Pauvert editions of the Manifestes du Surréalisme, discusses again the birth of the movement, beginning with the statement:

"Il est aujourd'hui de notoriété courante que le surréalisme, en tant que mouvement organisé, a pris naissance dans une opération de grande envergure portant sur le langage." (M 311)

Because of the retrospective nature of this part of the text its ideas are very similar to those expressed either in the first Manifeste du Surréalisme or in Les mots sans rides. Now, however, Breton considers, too, the kind of "révolution du mot" Joyce sought to bring about, but Breton immediately sees major differences between Joyce's "monologue intérieur" and the Surrealists' automatic writing, though he recognizes that they reveal a common desire to rebel against the tyranny of the totally debased language of everyday use: Breton feels they are "subtended" by two completely different attitudes:

"Au courant illusoire des associations conscientes, Joyce opposera un flux qu'il s'efforce de faire saillir de toutes parts et qui tend, en fin de compte, à l'imitation la plus approchante de la vie (moyennant quoi il se maintient dans le cadre de l'art, retombe dans l'illusion romanesque, n'évite pas de prendre rang dans la longue lignée des naturalistes et expressionnistes). A ce même courant - beaucoup plus modestement à première vue - l' 'automatisme psychique pur' qui commande le surréalisme opposera le débit d'une source qu'il ne s'agit que d'aller prospecter en soi-même assez loin et dont on ne saurait prétendre diriger le cours sans être assuré de la voir aussitôt se tarir." (M 312)

Breton claims that before Surrealism only occasional glimpses of "les phrases dites 'de demi-sommeil' ou 'de réveil' " could give any indication of the intensity and the importance of this source,

and the decisive contribution of Surrealism was to reveal that it could be tapped continually. Breton repeats that very few neologisms are to be found in the automatic texts and that automatic writing led neither to a dislocation of syntax nor to a disintegration of vocabulary. Breton is opposed to the "literary" preoccupations of Joyce, despite the fact that the exploitation of "polyphony" and polyvalency of meaning seems to suggest to Breton a constant return to the arbitrary. Naturally Breton sees in a different light the importance of the early Surrealist experiments:

"Le tout, pour le surréalisme, a été de se convaincre qu'on avait mis la main sur la 'matière première' (au sens alchimique) du langage: on savait, à partir de là, où la prendre et il va sans dire qu'il était sans intérêt de la reproduire à satiété; ceci pour eux qui s'étonnent que parmi nous la pratique de l'écriture automatique ait été délaissée si vite." (M 313)

Breton points out that hitherto one had regarded the merit of automatic writing as its focusing on the region where desire is given the reins and where myths are born and take wing, but then he claims:

"On n'a pas assez insisté sur le sens et la portée de l'opération qui tendait à restituer le langage à sa vraie vie, soit bien mieux que de remonter de la chose signifiée au signe qui lui survit, ce qui s'avérerait d'ailleurs impossible, de se reporter d'un bond à la naissance du signifiant." (*ibid.*)

At this point Breton is still trying to find and exploit analogies between Surrealism and occultism. The notion of "la matière première" has just been mentioned, and moreover it is in this vein that Breton continues for a while:

"L'esprit qui rend possible, et même concevable, une telle opération n'est autre que celui qui a animé de tout temps la philosophie occulte et selon lequel, du fait que l'énonciation est à l'origine de tout, il s'ensuit qu' 'il faut que le nom germe pour ainsi dire, sans quoi il est faux'. Le principal apport du surréalisme, dans la poésie comme dans la plastique, est d'avoir suffisamment exalté cette germination pour faire apparaître comme dérisoire tout ce qui n'est pas elle.

Comme j'ai pu le vérifier à distance, la définition du surréalisme donnée dans 'le Premier Manifeste', ne fait, en somme, que 'recouper' un des grands mots d'ordre traditionnels,

qui est d'avoir à 'crever le tambour de la raison raisonnante et en contempler le trou', ce qui mènera à s'éclairer les symboles jusqu'alors ténébreux." (ibid.)

After indicating not only the great importance Surrealism attaches to love and to the liberation of Woman but also the Surrealists' belief that carnal love and spiritual love are one and the same thing, Breton points out that Surrealism is thus different, and deliberately so, from the majority of traditional doctrines, according to which carnal love is a mirage and passion a "deplorable intoxication of astral light", in the sense in which this is pre-figured in the serpent of the Book of Genesis: Breton believes that if love is truly effective, it opens the door on a world where by definition there can no longer be any question of evil, sin or the Fall.

There follows the most important section of the text, as far as the present study is concerned, for Breton eventually considers together the image and analogy:

"L'attitude du surréalisme à l'égard de la nature est commandée avant tout par la conception initiale qu'il s'est faite de l' 'image' poétique. On sait qu'il y a vu le moyen d'obtenir, dans des conditions d'extrême détente bien mieux que d'extrême concentration de l'esprit, certains traits de feu reliant deux éléments de la réalité de catégories si éloignées l'une de l'autre que la raison se refuserait à les mettre en rapport et qu'il faut s'être défait momentanément de tout esprit critique pour leur permettre de se confronter. Cet extraordinaire grément d'étincelles, dès l'instant où l'on en a surpris le mode de génération et où l'on a pris conscience de ses inépuisables ressources, mène l'esprit à se faire du monde et de lui-même une représentation moins opaque. Il vérifie alors, fragmentairement il est vrai, du moins par lui-même, que 'tout ce qui est en haut est comme ce qui est en bas' et tout ce qui est en dedans, comme ce qui est en dehors. Le monde, à partir de là, s'offre à lui comme un cryptogramme qui ne demeure indéchiffrable qu'autant que l'on n'est pas rompu à la gymnastique acrobatique permettant à volonté de passer d'un agrès à l'autre. On n'insistera jamais trop sur le fait que la métaphore, bénéficiant de toute licence dans le surréalisme, laisse loin derrière elle l'analogie (pré-fabriquée) qu'ont tenté de promouvoir en France Charles Fourier et son disciple Alphonse Toussenel. Bien que toutes deux tombent d'accord pour honorer le système des 'correspondances', il y a de



l'une à l'autre la distance qui sépare le haut vol du terre-à-terre. On comprendra qu'il ne s'agit point, dans un vain esprit de progrès technique, d'accroître la vitesse et l'aisance de déplacement mais bien, pour faire que les rapports qu'on veut établir tirent véritablement à conséquence, de se rendre maître de la seule électricité conductrice." (M 315-316)

Although Breton concedes in a footnote that Fourier's theory of "l'analogie passionnelle ou tableau hiéroglyphique des passions humaines" abounds in flashes of genius, the above text seems decisive, as far as the respective merits in Breton's eyes of the image and analogy are concerned. Admittedly, at no time between 1940 and 1953 does Breton voice any doubts about the surrealist image, but it appears a little strange that he does not mention it as frequently as in his texts of the 1920's and 1930's. It may be that he had no wish to harp on the same string or that he had nothing further to add to his earlier statements on the image, to his earlier theory of the image, though, as has been seen, Signe Ascendant, by restoring the simile to a position on an equal footing with the metaphor, brings a fundamental modification to the 1924 theories. Yet if one reads the passage more carefully, one begins to perceive that the opposition Breton makes is not between the "image" and the "analogie" but between the former and "l'analogie (préfabriquée)", the word in brackets making a crucial difference. The poet's perception of analogies must be sudden, spontaneous, unpremeditated, intuitive. The conditions for this perception must be as favourable as those for the reception and recording of surrealist images by automatic writing. In this respect, it is significant that it is when Breton is holidaying on the Gaspé Peninsula and travelling around the Far West at the end of the Second World War that he is able to take in at leisure the beauties of the North American countryside, to relate them to contemporary problems and to work out his poetic solutions in Arcane 17 and

the Ode à Charles Fourier. Both the surprise generated by the arbitrary image and the discovery of analogies between apparently dissimilar phenomena enable Breton to decode nature's cryptogram and to unravel secrets which bring him satisfaction:

"Sur le fond du problème, qui est des rapports de l'esprit humain avec le monde sensoriel, le surréalisme se rencontre ici avec des penseurs aussi différents que Louis-Claude de Saint-Martin et Schopenhauer, en ce sens qu'il estime comme eux que nous devons 'chercher à comprendre la nature d'après nous-mêmes et non pas nous-mêmes d'après la nature'." (M 316)

At the end of Du surréalisme en ses oeuvres vives Breton stresses the important role played by poetic intuition in man's understanding of the world around him and claims, naturally, that it has at last been unbridled by Surrealism, that it desires not only to assimilate all known forms but also to create new ones and that it alone provides us with the thread which guides us back to the path of gnosis,<sup>1</sup> "en tant que connaissance de la Réalité suprasensible invisiblement visible dans un éternel mystère." (M 317)

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At no point after 1953 does Breton feel a need to write again about the arbitrary image, and after what he had said in Du surréalisme en ses oeuvres vives, there was nothing more to add at this

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1. The Gnostics gave an important function to the "female principle" in the genesis of the universe as well as in the attainment of spirituality. They also believed in the power of numbers and words. In this latter respect at least Breton's convictions resemble those of the Gnostic sects. In a fragment, Sur l'art magique, which appeared in Le Surréalisme, même (No. 2, printemps 1957) Breton writes: "(Le rôle capital qui est ici dévolu au 'Nom' trahirait à lui seul le substratum magique d'une telle pensée). Aussi bien tels disciples de Valentin, les Marcosiens, qui s'emploient à rendre non seulement les hommes, mais aussi les femmes, conscients de leurs pouvoirs magiques, se construiront-ils toute une cosmogonie du nom et du nombre, se livreront-ils à la cabale phonétique non moins qu'à l'illusionnisme". (PC 145)

level. Even though he may have been continually interested in esoteric thought, at the centre of which was the concept of analogy, his faith in the importance of the arbitrary image in poetry never really changes, and, as will be seen in Part III, his final creative writings are automatic texts and "phrases de réveil". Though he did not see the need to produce automatic texts "ad infinitum", he knew that, should he so desire, he could always do so: it was simply a question of finding again the right conditions. When Madeleine Chapsal asked him in 1962 whether he still practised automatic writing, he pointed out:

"..... l'écriture automatique ne saurait être une fin en soi. Le tout est de l'avoir obtenue aussi pure que possible car, à partir de là, il est facile de reconstituer et de reproduire la série d'opérations mentales qu'elle suppose au préalable...."  
(PC 206)

So although Breton continually talked about the relevant subjects which formed the basic ideas of the first Manifeste (the arbitrary image, automatic writing) and related them to a series of subsidiary topics, at no time did he fill the obvious gap left by the Manifeste, the systematic classification and discussion of surrealist images which the critic would have welcomed. Nonetheless, Breton's more theoretical statements form an indispensable guide for the study and analysis of his poems: they describe the basic methods employed by Breton and they reveal the nature of his preoccupations in the field of poetics; they help to justify and explain the structure of his poems; they do not supply all the answers, but they provide certain clues.

Just as there was an apparent shift in Breton's theoretical writings from the arbitrary image to analogy, it would be natural to anticipate a similar evolution in his poetry; and by and large such



an evolution is perceptible. After what one might call the "pre-surrealist poems", those produced immediately after Breton's discovery of automatic writing do rely greatly on the surprise, the shock, generated by a stream of arbitrary, surrealist images; later the quest for, and the perception of, analogies by the poet results in the appearance of more carefully elaborated and structured works in which the moments of perception and inspiration are translated by more isolated bursts of imagery.

There is also a similar progression in "the prose quartet", if not from the arbitrary image to analogy, at least the analogical process is far more obviously important in Arcane 17 than it was in Nadja.

PART TWOTHE PROSE QUARTET

### INTRODUCTION

This section is devoted to the four works, Nadja, Les Vases communicants, L'Amour fou and Arcane 17. One can regard the first three as a trilogy,<sup>1</sup> to which Arcane 17 serves as an appendix, but one which is much wider in scope. At first glance they do not appear to be poetry; they are certainly not poems in any conventional sense of the word. Indeed Breton claims that the style he adopts for Nadja is that of the medical report: it is difficult to imagine anything further removed from what is normally understood by the word "poem". Yet to write about Breton's poetry without allotting them a very important place would mean that one is omitting something of great significance and of great relevance. They perhaps belong to a new genre of poetry, as Anna Balakian claims, pointing out how paradoxical this is:

"Actually Breton aspired to the breakdown of all genres as determined by literary form, and beyond the breakdown, he hoped for an amalgamation of the notions inherent in the genres into a unity called poetry which would include the best attribute of prose, that is, its flexibility. The distinction between the two was for him not of form but of structure, the structure of the writing directly a reflection of the process of thought. The process consisted of giving the lead to the imagination over the logical controls of organization and sequence indicative of nonpoetic writing, but adhering to prose form as the more supple. For him any form of writing could be classified as poetry if it utilized as its mental movement the powers of analogy and proceeded on the basis of the unpremeditated relationship of images and of the mind's reaction to the phenomena of the exterior world.... ..... We expect, of course, the power of the analogy in verse; but when it appears in prose as it does in Nadja, Les Vases communicants, and L'Amour fou, it does not mean that Breton is indulging in a prose poem. For him the old antinomy built into the designation 'prose poem' no longer exists. Poetry in its extended sense, as understood by the surrealists, has to do with the channeling of the mind, freed of the exigencies of logical direction; it is

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1. cf. the title of the study by V. Crastre, André Breton, Trilogie surréaliste: Nadja, Les Vases communicants, L'Amour fou, Paris: Société d'Édition d'enseignement supérieur, 1971.



not the injection of assonance, alliteration, and other outer devices that makes prose more poetic."<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps Anna Balakian ought to concede that these "devices" are to be found in these works, particularly in L'Amour fou and Arcane 17, but her main points are perfectly valid and get to the heart of the matter. The four works in question may not be poems, but one feels at times, especially with L'Amour fou and Arcane 17, that they are poetry, in the sense in which Breton understands the word; they are related to the conception that poetry is a way of life; they have an analogical basis; it is in their structure rather than in their style that they are poetic; these writings are the expression of a poet. Anna Balakian calls them "analogical prose";<sup>2</sup> one could possibly describe them as analogical autobiography but we are referring to them as the "prose quartet", believing that they constitute a series, operating as they do around the workings of "objective chance", evoking some of the most important moments of Breton's life and revealing a growing awareness and understanding on the poet's part of the significance of the analogies he detects between things. This question of nomenclature is really unimportant, however. In any case, the Surrealists always believed that distinctions between the various literary genres are irrelevant and that the term "la Poésie" could embrace works in all sorts of forms.

Nadja, Les Vases communicants and L'Amour fou reveal certain crucial aspects of Breton's affective life between 1926 and 1936; the dominant theme running through them can be expressed either in terms of objective chance or of desire seeking the object of its

1. Balakian, A., André Breton, p.103.

2. Chapter VII of her book, André Breton, is entitled "Toward a New Structure of Writing: Analogical Prose: Nadja, Les Vases communicants, L'Amour fou."

realization. Perhaps only subconsciously, in 1926 Breton was seeking a new experience of love, and the three books tell in different ways of the paths Breton takes, culminating in his meeting and marriage with Jacqueline and the birth of their daughter, Aube. Arcane 17 places the theme of new love, this time for Elisa, against the backcloth of contemporary events, the news of the liberation of Paris, and relates this to the theme of the liberation of Woman.

In our examination of these four works, however, we shall still be paying particular attention to the nature and role of the imagery in their analogical structure, partly to see whether or not there are differences in this respect between them and Breton's poetry proper. Because they can themselves be regarded as a kind of poetry, even though they also contain further important theoretical observations and autobiographical elements which help to throw light on some of Breton's poems proper, they form a useful bridge between the purely theoretical first part of this study and the examination of the poems in Part III.

# CHAPTER ONE

## "NADJA" (1928)

For many years after the First World War Breton was fascinated and perhaps even obsessed with the question of reality: its nature, its definition, its relationship with the dream-world; and it was, naturally, inseparable from the concept of "surréalité" he and his friends had evolved. Allied to this basic question is that of one's identity, and it is on this note that the book Nadja opens, for Breton's first words are the fundamental, but still surprising question, "Qui suis-je?" The first step in his investigation is an attempt to consider his own identity in relation to that of other people. This is why he modifies his initial question and asks:

".... en effet pourquoi tout ne reviendrait-il pas à savoir qui je 'hante'?" (N 9)

To solve the problem of his own identity, he seeks to discover the ways in which he differs from his fellows: his identity is to be considered in terms of the unique function he has in this world, the unique role he has been allotted.

The second section of the book follows on from this preamble, but even this new section is but a prelude to the main part of the work, and Breton admits it is "en marge du récit que je vais entreprendre". (N 19)

He proposes to select some of what he considers to be the most notable incidents or episodes in his own life up to that point. These "faits de valeur intrinsèque" (N 20) are, he feels, signals, the keys to

".... un monde comme défendu qui est celui des rapprochements soudains, des pétrifiantes coïncidences, des réflexes primant



tout autre essor du mental, des accords plaqués comme au piano, des éclairs qui feraient voir, mais alors voir, s'ils n'étaient encore plus rapides que les autres." (N 19-20)

Breton seemingly cannot refrain from expressing the idea of sudden revelation, a basic aspect of hermetic philosophy, in terms of images of flashes of lightning, reinforced here by the allusion to the "rapprochements soudains" and the "pétrifiantes coïncidences", which in Breton's life play a role similar to that of surrealist images in his poetry. He admits at the outset that the incidents will not be narrated in any pre-arranged order but at random, as they spring to mind.

A brief survey of the "plot" of Nadja, before the overt and more detailed discussion of the important themes and stylistic features, will demonstrate that Breton, by and large, practises what he preaches in this respect. It will also begin to show how certain themes reappear, intermittently, in a haphazard manner.

The book covers the nine years between 1918 and 1927. Breton therefore ignores, significantly, the first twenty-two years of his life. He prefers to talk about the mysterious circumstances in which he made the acquaintance of Eluard and Péret, and both encounters could be seen as examples of the "rencontre fortuite", which is one of the aspects of the new Surrealist theme of "le hasard objectif" Nadja introduces. In addition, he reveals some of his tastes and habits during that period. One has the impression that he adopted an attitude of extreme "disponibilité"; he likes Nantes, for instance, because he sees it as

".... peut-être avec Paris la seule ville en France où j'ai l'impression que peut m'arriver quelque chose qui en vaut la peine." (N 33)

He devotes several pages to an apparently trivial play, Les Détraquées, which he found fascinating; he mentions an encounter with a

well-read girl at the Marché aux Puces; he recounts one or two curious anecdotes. When one first reads this part of the book, one wonders why Breton should have found these things so noteworthy. It is only with hindsight that one can begin to see that, for Breton at least, they possessed an emblematic quality.

The central section of the book is devoted to Breton's liaison with Nadja. In the light of the importance he is to attach to objective chance and to desire seeking the object of its realization, it is perhaps only when he writes L'Amour fou that he realizes its full significance.

It immediately seems symbolic and appropriate that Breton and Nadja meet in the street and that Nadja should know that her name is only the beginning of the Russian word for "hope".

At the end of their first conversation, in a café, Breton is able to bring back the problem of identity raised at the beginning of the book:

"Sur le point de m'en aller, je veux lui poser la question qui résume toutes les autres, une question qu'il n'y a que moi pour poser, mais qui, au moins une fois, a trouvé une réponse à sa hauteur: 'Qui êtes-vous?' Et elle, sans hésiter: 'Je suis l'âme errante'." (N 80-81)

Further meetings ensue, some of which are chance encounters. Nadja reveals a gift of prophecy, uses bizarre images reminiscent of those found in Surrealist texts and poems and her life seems full of odd coincidences.

A frustrating visit to Le Vésinet with Nadja leads Breton to renew once more his examination of reality and his search for a definition of his own identity, for he suddenly asks himself:

"Qui étions-nous devant la réalité, cette réalité que je sais maintenant couchée aux pieds de Nadja, comme un chien fourbe?"  
(N 126)

This quest for a truer understanding of reality is not pursued explicitly, however, for any length of time in Nadja — it will be one of the prime concerns of Les Vases communicants — and it is followed by one of the finest passages in the book, where Breton tries to capture the essence of his "heroine" with allusions to magic, genies and the Sphinx, and mentions Nadja's vision of him in terms of the sun. By these means he is able to translate the almost supernatural character of their relationship into appropriate linguistic terms.

Their relationship is suddenly threatened, however, after Nadja's description of an incident in a bar, and from this point Breton's tone grows more detached. Rather ominously, he reveals to us all he wants to retain of the Nadja episode:

"Je ne veux plus me souvenir, au courant des jours, que de quelques phrases, prononcées devant moi ou écrites d'un trait sous mes yeux par elle, phrases qui sont celles où je retrouve le mieux le ton de sa voix et dont la résonance en moi demeure si grande." (N 135)

He lists some of these phrases, which bear a close resemblance to lines from his own poetry at that time or from that of some of his fellow Surrealists, hermetic phrases such as

"La griffe du lion étreint le sein de la vigne";

and

"Pourquoi cette balance qui oscillait dans l'obscurité d'un trou plein de boulets de charbon?" (N 136)

Not only has Nadja "bequeathed" to Breton such phrases, but also she has invented for him "une fleur merveilleuse: 'La Fleur des amants' ", which he regards as the symbol of their relationship. This, like her other strange drawings, where it may not be purely accidental that one finds some of the more common heraldic figures — eagles, serpents, sirens, stars —, affords us a glimpse into Nadja's



private universe. "Le rêve du chat" (N 138-141) may be particularly significant in this respect, since the cat, in trying to escape, is held down to the earth by a heavy weight, just as Nadja herself is rooted to the Earth by material concerns, though her eyes are ever gazing into some mysterious beyond.

Nadja incarnates the very essence of Surrealism: not only does she gradually emerge as the embodiment of "le hasard objectif", but also she breathes and speaks the purest surrealist language, the surrealism of the kind advocated by Breton in the first Manifeste.

The ultimate separation of Breton and Nadja grows more and more imminent, however. Breton comes to realize that only one thing could have prevented the inevitable break-up:

"Seul l'amour au sens où je l'entends - mais alors le mystérieux, l'impossible, l'unique, le confondant et l'indubitable amour - tel enfin qu'il ne peut être qu'à toute épreuve, eût pu permettre l'accomplissement du miracle." (N 157)

The poet's later meeting with Jacqueline Lamba in circumstances not wholly dissimilar to those of his meeting with Nadja, will spark off such a love, the "amour fou" which for Breton is the sole kind of love worthy of the name.

Though Breton could not have realized it at the time, Nadja was perhaps the herald of "l'amour fou", but only the herald; and the next sentence of Nadja reveals her fate:

"On est venu, il y a quelques mois, m'apprendre que Nadja était folle." (ibid.)

As a result of eccentric behaviour in her hotel, she had been taken to a mental hospital in the Vaucluse. With this information the reader can at last begin to see that the title of the play, Les Détraquées, could perhaps take on fresh, portentous significance.

Breton feels twinges of guilt and remorse; he feels that he

might have been able to restrain Nadja and save her, but he is by no means certain. One would expect the book to end on this note, but this is, in fact, only the end of the central section. Nadja is not a carefully structured novel, with a real beginning and end, but a new type of writing, illustrating the workings of objective chance. A fresh adventure is about to commence for Breton, the quest for "la Merveille" is to be resumed. The changing appearance of Paris is conspiring to divert his attention from Nadja. A new love is replacing her in his mind, a love which is already inspiring him to a new outburst of lyricism, a new hymn to the Eternal Feminine:

"Sans le faire exprès, tu t'es substituée aux formes qui m'étaient les plus familières, ainsi qu'à plusieurs figures de mon pressentiment. Nadja était de ces dernières, et il est parfait que tu me l'aies cachée.

Tout ce que je sais est que cette substitution de personnes s'arrête à toi, parce que rien ne t'est substituable, et que pour moi c'était de toute éternité devant toi que devait prendre fin cette succession d'énigmes.

Tu n'es pas une énigme pour moi.

Je dis que tu me détournes pour toujours de l'énigme." (N 183)

Love, as it will do later in Breton's career, seems to bring a solution to life's riddles.

The book closes on a consideration of beauty, and the conclusion Breton draws in the final sentence is the famous definition, "La beauté sera convulsive ou ne sera pas." For Breton beauty has to be envisaged only "à des fins passionnelles" (N 185); neither static nor dynamic, "comme un train qui bondit sans cesse dans la gare de Lyon et dont je sais qu'il ne va jamais partir, qu'il n'est pas parti" (N 186), quivering, quaking, pulsating, trembling, "faite de saccades", it is typified again in an image employing the "beau comme" formula of Lautréamont: "Le coeur humain, beau comme un sismographe." The comparison brings together "distant realities", but the vehicle, the seismograph, suggests succinctly not only the beating of the heart but

also its great sensitivity.

This is but the manifest content of Nadja, however, Its real significance lurks just beneath the surface and can perhaps be fathomed via the theme of the quest and the principle of objective chance.

The book's initial question, "Qui suis-je?", immediately provides a clue to the veritable nature of Nadja: its central "character" is not the young woman but Breton himself, and its real purpose is Breton's search for an answer, his personal voyage of discovery; but as the book unfolds, this private quest opens out. The emphasis is placed, however, on the seeking rather than the finding:

"Se peut-il qu'ici cette poursuite éperdue prenne fin? Poursuite de quoi, je ne sais, mais poursuite, pour mettre ainsi en oeuvre tous les artifices de la séduction mentale." (N 126)

As Breton speaks of his quest, images of light, of revelation, well up almost automatically in a splendid long sentence full of rhetorical panache, with its negative repetitions building up to a climax at once powerful but gentle:

"Rien — ni le brillant, quand on les coupe, de métaux inusuels comme le sodium — ni la phosphorescence, dans certaines régions, des carrières — ni l'éclat du lustre admirable qui monte des puits — ni le crépitement du bois d'une horloge que je jette au feu pour qu'elle meure en sonnant l'heure — ni le surcroît d'attrait qu'exerce l'Embarquement pour Cythère lorsqu'on vérifie que sous diverses attitudes il ne met en scène qu'un seul couple — ni la majesté des paysages de réservoirs — ni le charme des pans de murs, avec leurs fleurettes et leurs ombres de cheminées, des immeubles en démolition: rien de tout cela, rien de ce qui constitue pour moi ma lumière propre, n'a été oublié." (ibid.)

The images here seem to prefigure the "convulsive beauty" Breton throws down almost as a challenge in the book's famous final words: shimmering fire, buildings in the process of demolition, the clock dying as it strikes the hour. Eternity and the instant are as one,



the intensity of the moment of revelation is everything.

The theme of the quest and the motif of light are combined once more in a poignant, prophetic, mysterious pronouncement made by Nadja on the occasion of their first meeting:

"C'était vraiment une étoile, une étoile vers laquelle vous alliez. Vous ne pouviez manquer d'arriver à cette étoile. A vous entendre parler, je sentais que rien ne vous en empêcherait: rien, pas même moi.... Vous ne pourrez jamais voir cette étoile comme je la voyais. Vous ne comprenez pas: elle est comme le coeur d'une fleur sans coeur." (N 80)

Nadja's words could perhaps be taken as a prophecy of the importance of the shooting-stars in the long poem, Les Etats généraux, and of the star of hope Breton makes the title-motif of Arcane 17; or of the star which would replace the traditional cross on Breton's tombstone.

Breton then speaks of the admiration he feels for those men who contrive to get locked in an art-gallery at night so that they may gaze illicitly on the portrait of a woman they illumine with a dark-lantern; and this anecdote serves as the prelude to the crucial claim Breton makes:

"Comment, ensuite, n'en sauraient-ils pas de cette femme beaucoup plus que nous n'en savons? Il se peut que la vie demande à être déchiffrée comme un cryptogramme." (N 131)

The light image once more symbolizes the idea of revelation and introduces the hermetic notion; and Breton has one great advantage over the men locked in the gallery, for Nadja is far more than a mere portrait: she is a living Rosetta stone.

Gradually Breton begins to perceive that he and Nadja were prey to the demon of analogy.<sup>1</sup> In a further series of images with a

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1. Earlier in the central section of the book (N 102), Breton refers to the Surrealists' "jeu de l'analogie", in which he was often identified with the dolphin; the dolphin was a traditional symbol of the transmigration of souls, in which Nadja clearly believes.

distinctly Gothic or Romantic air Breton attempts to evoke the paradise of "le merveilleux", latent in life but begging to be made manifest, a series concluding with the theme of the spiritual journey as the expression of the quest:

"Des escaliers secrets, des cadres dont les tableaux glissent rapidement et disparaissent pour faire place à un archange portant une épée ou pour faire place à ceux qui doivent avancer toujours, des boutons sur lesquels on fait très indirectement pression et qui provoquent le déplacement en hauteur, en longueur, de toute une salle et le plus rapide changement de décor: il est permis de concevoir la plus grande aventure de l'esprit comme un voyage de ce genre au paradis des pièges."  
(N 131)

The theme of the quest is continued in Nadja's anecdote about spending the night in the Forêt de Fontainebleau in the company of an archaeologist looking for stones.

The Holy Grail is not really discovered in this first work in the series, however; Nadja poses the questions, opens Breton's eyes, sets him on the course, but it does not bring any ultimate solutions, even though Carlos Lynes claims that

".... Breton, at the end of the spiritual itinerary which informs the book, is the man who, through all the experiences evoked therein, has discovered his destiny, love." <sup>1</sup>

Unfortunately Breton's affair with the woman he refers to as X was not entirely satisfactory.

In an article entitled "The Nadja File" Roger Shattuck claims that ".... for a time Breton projected into Nadja the powerful Surrealist myth of le hasard objectif."<sup>2</sup>

Shattuck is perhaps exaggerating Breton's conscious manipulation of the facts to suit his own thesis, despite Breton's claim that

1. Lynes, Carlos, Surrealism and the Novel: Breton's 'Nadja', French Studies, Vol. XX, 1966, p.383.
2. Cahiers DADA Surréalisme, Paris; Lettres Modernes; No.1, 1966, p.56.

he was merely reporting the facts as he remembered them, but it is difficult to explain aspects of Nadja without reference to this concept.

In L'Amour fou Breton, attempting to reconcile the views of Engels and Freud, will define "le hasard objectif" as "la forme de manifestation de la nécessité extérieure qui se fraie un chemin dans l'inconscient humain." (AF 25). This definition, with its half-explicit, half-implicit linking of the external and the internal, the conscious and the subconscious, points to a close connection between "le hasard objectif" and symbolism.

Nadja certainly seems to embody the theme of "le hasard objectif". It is pure chance that Breton should meet her on the Rue Lafayette, and despite the various rendez-vous they agree on, they meet again as frequently by chance on the following days. In addition to this many other instances of the chance encounter are mentioned. The brief reunion in Paris between Nadja and the student she had left behind in Lille was not the result of a prearranged meeting:

"A près d'un an de là, cependant, elle l'a rencontré par hasard: Tous deux ont été très surpris." (N 73)

The only pages Nadja had cut in the copy of Les Pas perdus Breton had given her are, significantly, those of the article, L'esprit nouveau, in which Breton tells of an unusual encounter made by Aragon, Derain and himself all within a few minutes of each other. Then there are the odd, or even mysterious circumstances in which Breton made the acquaintance of Eluard and Péret. Finally, the recollection of the sight of a woman, obviously naked beneath her coat, in the arcade beside the Electric-Palace, leads Breton to express the wish to encounter a beautiful naked woman at night in a wood.

Closely allied to the theme of the chance encounter is that of



coincidence; Breton has specifically related the concept of the "coïncidence" to "le hasard objectif" in Entretiens; in reply to a question, in which he was asked why he was so interested in what ordinary people call coincidence, he observes:

"Du fait que, philosophiquement, le hasard objectif (qui n'est rien autre que le lieu géométrique de ces coïncidences) me paraissait constituer le noeud de ce qui était pour moi le problème des problèmes. Il s'agissait de l'élucidation des rapports qui existent entre la 'nécessité naturelle' et la 'nécessité humaine', corrélativement entre la nécessité et la liberté. Je ne vois pas le moyen d'en parler en termes moins abstraits; ce problème ne peut guère se poser qu'ainsi: d'où vient qu'il arrive que se rencontrent au point de se confondre - à vrai dire rarement - des phénomènes que l'esprit humain ne peut rapporter qu'à des séries causales indépendantes, d'où vient que la lueur qui résulte de cette fusion soit si vive, quoique si éphémère?" (E 136-137)

Under the rubric of coincidence can be placed the passage which begins with Breton's exquisite description of the kiss he gives to Nadja in a café:

"Avec respect je baise ses très jolies dents et elle alors, lentement, gravement, la seconde fois sur quelques notes plus haut que la première: 'La communion se passe en silence..... La communion se passe en silence.' C'est, m'explique-t-elle, que ce baiser la laisse sous l'impression de quelque chose de sacré, où ses dents 'tenaient lieu d'hostie'." (N 107)

The very next day the first post brings Breton a letter from Louis Aragon in Italy. The letter contained a photograph showing a detail of a Uccello Breton had never seen before, La Profanation de l'Hostie.

The role of chance is counterbalanced to some extent by the power of prophecy certain people possess, but Breton is fascinated by both. When he can see that an apparently chance encounter has been predicted, he is struck with wonder. The classic example of this in Breton's own case is, of course, the famous "Nuit du Tournesol" he discusses in L'Amour fou. Although Nadja herself is able to make a few minor predictions, the true cases of prophesy mentioned in the book are those made by the clairvoyant, Mme Sacco. The first

example is particularly interesting because Breton employs in his description of it a reference to the arbitrary image as the vehicle of a comparison. In a footnote Breton points out that Mme Sacco had told him at the beginning of 1926 that he was greatly preoccupied with a certaine "Hélène". Breton reveals that he was to be very interested in Hélène Smith, but the footnote ends with the surprising remark:

"La conclusion à en tirer serait de l'ordre de celle que m'a imposée précédemment la fusion dans un rêve de deux images très éloignées l'une de l'autre. 'Hélène, c'est moi', disait Nadja." (N 90)

Yet more convincing is Mme Sacco's prediction to Max Ernst that he would cross paths with a Nadia or Natacha, whom he would not like and who would do some physical harm to the woman he loved. This counter-indication was sufficient for Ernst to decline Breton's request to paint a portrait of Nadja.

Although the theme of "le hasard objectif" Nadja embodies is the principal preoccupation of Breton in this book, Nadja is interesting too, especially as far as this study is concerned, for certain of its subordinate themes and motifs, as well as for features of its composition.

One of the most unusual aspects of the book is the importance attached to certain signs and symbols, in terms of which the couple see each other.

Nadja finds it difficult to describe or think of Breton without resorting to images of fire or a hand, or the two combined. At first she appears to suffer from delusions; she will stop suddenly and exclaim:

"Cette main, cette main sur la Seine, pourquoi cette main qui flambe sur l'eau? C'est vrai que le feu et l'eau sont la même chose...." (N 97)

Nadja seems capable of envisaging the "point suprême" where contraries become one; and, furthermore, as Victor Crastre has observed, this marriage of fire and water brings together symbols of heaven and hell.<sup>1</sup>

Shortly afterwards Nadja is obsessed once more by the same phrases, the same images, but this time she links them explicitly with the person of Breton: "La main de feu, c'est à ton sujet, tu sais, c'est toi", and a few lines further on, "... c'est toujours le feu qui revient quand il s'agit de toi." (N 115) When she tries to draw Breton, she portrays him with his hair looking like long flames. Not only is Breton for her a god, in the full sense of the word, he is also the sun. (N 128)

Whereas Breton suggests for Nadja fire and a hand, he conceives of her in terms of air and eyes, though the importance of the latter motif is reduced by the fact that Breton is invariably attracted by women with beautiful and striking eyes. The elemental image of the air is suggested, however, by Nadja's ethereal and volatile qualities: she is, after all, the "génie libre" and the "âme errante"; and these qualities evoked by Nadja are reinforced in a dream-analysis Breton makes a decade later, in 1938, when he writes:

"De lui-même d'abord, puis un peu plus tard, par le rôle que ce nom joua dans certaines circonstances de ma vie, Nadja se mit à symboliser une sorte d'esprit, à moitié somnambule, d'une telle délicatesse, d'une telle compréhension pour tout ce qui touche à l'amour, que je ne me le représente plus autrement que comme ces pensées de Nietzsche qui viennent sur des pattes de colombe: Nadja devient synonyme d'oiseau, oiseau étant pris dans le sens assez particulier qu'ont pu lui donner les poètes." <sup>2</sup>

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1. André Breton, p.28.

2. Cahiers G.L.M., No.7, Paris, 1938; reproduced in Durozoï, G. & Lecherbonnier, B., Le Surréalisme, p.262.



The images of birds and the air pave the way for the theme of freedom which rises to the surface towards the end of the work.

The above elemental images, together with the earlier allusion to the profanation of the host, make one feel at times that the occultation of Surrealism Breton was to demand in the Second Manifeste may already be getting under way. Moreover, Nadja is not only an incarnation of the theme of "le hasard objectif", she is one of the finest examples of the "femme-fée" prized by the Surrealists. In this respect it is interesting that she should consider herself as a Mélusine figure. She portrays herself in some of her drawings as Mélusine (N 123, 147) and cultivates the resemblance deliberately by arranging her hair "... en cinq touffes bien distinctes, de manière à laisser une étoile au sommet du front." (N 147-153) It may be simply a question of the wild fancies of a young woman on the verge of insanity, but to the poet Breton they are fascinating and poetic, in the strictest sense of the word. It is not without significance that in the years immediately after he wrote Nadja Breton took a deep interest in insanity and particularly in the poetic potential of certain states of madness. (cf. the section on L'Immaculée Conception).

The two places which, to the Surrealists, seem the richest in potential in their quest for "le merveilleux" are "châteaux" and Paris. Both assume some importance in Nadja. Near the castle at Saint-Germain Nadja imagines that she is Mme de Chevreuse and claims that a visit to one particular room in the right-hand turret is all one requires in order to know and understand Saint-Germain.

The book is set primarily in Paris, however. We follow Breton as he strolls around his favourite quarters: we see him along the embankments of the Seine, we stop off at cafés and bars with him and

Nadja, we see the hotels where each of them had stayed. Yet one particular nook seems to contain the whole essence of their Paris, the Place Dauphine, which had already been the site of Text 24 of Poisson soluble. In Nadja Breton confides that

"....(Cette place Dauphine est bien un des lieux les plus profondément retirés que je connaisse, un des pires terrains vagues qui soient à Paris. Chaque fois que je m'y suis trouvé, j'ai senti m'abandonner peu à peu l'envie d'aller ailleurs, il m'a fallu argumenter avec moi-même pour me dégager d'une étreinte très douce, trop agréablement insistante et, à tout prendre, brisante. De plus, j'ai habité quelque temps un hôtel jouxtant cette place, 'City Hôtel', où les allées et venues à toute heure, pour qui ne se satisfait pas de solutions trop simples, sont suspectes.)" (N 92)

Curiously enough, the Place Dauphine clearly disturbs Nadja. She is troubled by events it has witnessed in the past and by events she feels it will witness in the future.

After narrating the tale of Nadja, as Breton begins to turn his thoughts in other directions, he notices the changing face of Paris, but without lamenting.

Not only places made Paris a city of such wonder to the Surrealists, however. They were remarkably intrigued, Aragon perhaps above all, by its strange street-signs. Breton, not to be outdone, has a tale or two to tell about some of them: BOIS-CHARBONS, CAMEES DURS, the Sphinx-Hôtel.

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Up to this point the themes and motifs of Nadja have been the same as in many of Breton's works. Where Nadja differs to some extent from the poems and automatic texts is the way in which it reveals the more compassionate streak in Breton's nature. His discovery that Nadja had been removed to an asylum provokes him into making a scathing attack on a society which can treat human beings

in so inhuman a fashion, a society which can strip a person of his or her priceless freedom, a society in which so much (health, happiness and opportunities) depends on money, a society which has been known to imprison its men of genius. Breton was convinced that social and economic inequality and the injustice of the society in which he lived had further condemned Nadja, for she was not just sick in mind, she was also poor. Breton's own attitude towards the treatment of the mentally ill was extremely enlightened:

"Il ne faut jamais avoir pénétré dans un asile pour ne pas savoir qu'on y fait les fous tout comme dans les maisons de correction on fait les bandits.... L'atmosphère des asiles est telle qu'elle ne peut manquer d'exercer l'influence la plus débilite, la plus pernicio, sur ceux qu'ils abritent, et cela dans le sens même où leur débilitation initiale les a conduits." (N 161-162)

Spurred on by what had happened to Nadja, Breton champions the cause of freedom, as he will throughout his life:

"Elle était forte, enfin, et très faible, comme on peut l'être, de cette idée qui toujours avait été la sienne, mais dans laquelle je ne l'avais que trop aidée à donner le pas sur les autres: à savoir que la liberté, acquise ici-bas au prix de mille et des plus difficiles renoncements, demande à ce qu'on jouisse d'elle sans restrictions dans le temps où elle est donnée, sans considération pragmatique d'aucune sorte et cela parce que l'émancipation humaine, conçue en définitive sous sa forme révolutionnaire la plus simple, qui n'en est pas moins l'émancipation humaine à tous égards, entendons-nous bien, selon les moyens dont chacun dispose, demeure la seule cause qu'il soit digne de servir." (N 165-166)

Nadja herself seemed to go beyond the idea of liberty and in the end this was to be her undoing. This is illustrated by a curious anecdote, almost hidden away in a footnote near the end of the book, which shows that Breton was instinctively unable to satisfy Nadja's love-death wish, when she tried to keep his foot pressed down hard on the accelerator of the car he was driving.

Though elsewhere Breton may attack with vehemence what he considers to be the abuses, the drawbacks, the evils of the society



in which he lives, his tone in Nadja has an extra poignancy and bespeaks a genuine love for his fellow-men.

As far as the style of the book is concerned, Nadja's chief interest resides perhaps in the use of photographs to replace verbal descriptions, which Breton in the first Manifeste had regarded as inane in many novels. This adds a new dimension to the question of imagery in literature, of course. Henceforth, the use of photographic material plays an important role in Breton's prose-works; in L'Amour fou, however, he will supplement the photographs with verbal descriptions. In Nadja one finds not only photographs of people and places mentioned in the text, but also reproductions of Nadja's drawings and of paintings or details of paintings by famous artists - and not just contemporary ones -, primitive statuettes and masks, Surrealist objects.

Breton claims that the "tone" of Nadja copies exactly that of

"... l'observation médicale, entre toutes neuropsychiatrique, qui tend à garder trace de tout ce qu'examen et interrogatoire peuvent livrer, sans s'embarrasser en le rapportant du moindre apprêt quant au style." (N 6)

Thus in this book Breton's own medical studies have a direct influence on his style of writing, and although Breton is openly rather suspicious about the word "style", presumably because of its associations with the despised concept of "literature", he is attempting to cultivate in Nadja a certain kind of writing, albeit a non-literary kind. However, some of the quotations from the book included in this chapter should reveal that it is not entirely devoid of lyricism.

Related to this question of tone is Breton's attitude to the problem of characters in a novel, and in his preamble he objects to the way in which novelists use one real person as the basis for two

fictitious characters, or vice versa. He consoles himself with the conviction that the days of novels which rely on these methods are numbered. It is perhaps this questioning of some of the fundamental aspects of the writer's craft rather than anything else which made Breton an influence on, or a catalyst for, certain of the "nouveaux romanciers" after the Second World War, even though the latter may not always agree with his views. We are reminded, for example, of Robbe-Grillet's observations on character in Pour un nouveau roman:

"En fait, les créateurs de personnages, au sens traditionnel, ne réussissent plus à nous proposer que des fantoches auxquels eux-mêmes ont cessé de croire. Le roman de personnages appartient bel et bien au passé, il caractérise une époque: celle qui marqua l'apogée de l'individu."<sup>1</sup>;

and of the criticism made by Butor, an admirer of Breton, of the distinction that he found in the Premier Manifeste between

".... deux sortes de moments: les uns intéressants, brillants, qu'il vaut la peine de 'cristalliser', les autres 'nuls', dont il ne faut pas parler."<sup>2</sup>

In Nadja, as we have seen, Breton selects only what he regards as the "faits de valeur intrinsèque".

If the tone Breton sets out to achieve in Nadja is that of the medical report, certain individual facts, incidents, anecdotes and phrases are, on his own admission, similar to those found in automatic texts; furthermore, unexpected and apparently gratuitous facts and phrases are of the greatest thematic significance, given the importance Breton attaches in this book to "le hasard objectif". The most noteworthy episodes of his life are examples of the incursion of objective chance into his life and he considers them to be "of intrinsic value" (N 20). They are signs, indices, which can be

1. op.cit., Paris: Edns de Minuit, 1963, p.28.

2. Butor, M., Essais sur le roman, Paris: Gallimard (Coll. 'Idées'), 1969, p.28.

interpreted only in retrospect; they belong to the intricate network of analogies, like the images in the remaining volumes of the "quartet".

As far as the structure is concerned, he tells us he wanted the book to be "battant comme une porte" (N 181). This phrase evokes the way in which the numerous little incidents and anecdotes are presented - episodes which are apparently digressions form an important feature of Breton's writings - but one can still discern a broader division of the book into preambles, the central Nadja section, conclusion.

Because of its tone, because of the fact that it is written in prose and because Nadja is not an automatic text, one is not really surprised to find that it is not dominated by a riot of surrealist images, as were Les Champs magnétiques and Poisson soluble. Yet as one reads the book, one quickly realizes that the adoption of the style of the medical report has not resulted in a total absence of curious images; admittedly they are merely sprinkled about the text, as in a traditional novel, but they do appear to play a more profound role than their counterparts in more conventional novels. They are not pure embellishment; like the instances of objective chance, one suspects that some possess a revelatory power. Genuine surrealist images are found in the list of bizarre phrases uttered by Nadja, which are, as we have seen, all Breton wishes to retain of this episode; and near the beginning of the book there is a curious passage which contains a series of images, constituting a Surrealist tableau, because everything referred to is here made of glass:



"Pour moi, je continuerai à habiter ma maison de verre, où l'on peut voir qui vient me rendre visite, où tout ce qui est suspendu aux plafonds et aux murs tient comme par enchantement, où je repose la nuit sur un lit de verre aux draps de verre, où qui je suis m'apparaîtra tôt ou tard gravé au diamant." (N 18)

Yet appropriately enough, the sense of these images is quite transparent. Although Breton regarded the total effacement of Lautréamont behind his writings as mysteriously challenging, he was suspicious of other people who try to do likewise. That is why in Nadja, as elsewhere, Breton agrees to speak of himself, to narrate episodes from his own life. He feels that by so doing, by exploring himself, he may discover the answer to his opening question of identity. Nevertheless, Breton was always reticent about certain periods and aspects of his own life, his silence about his childhood being the most obvious illustration of this.

In addition to the above examples and the symbols mentioned earlier (v. supra, pp. 209-10), Breton is struck by an image Nadja employs, when they are sitting one night in the Tuileries gardens. She observes one of the fountains and proclaims:

"Ce sont tes pensées et les miennes. Vois d'où elles partent toutes, jusqu'où elles s'élèvent et comme c'est encore plus joli quand elles retombent. Et puis aussitôt elles se fondent, elles sont reprises avec la même force, de nouveau c'est cet élanement brisé, cette chute..... et comme cela indéfiniment." (N 99)

Breton is amazed, for a short while before he had come across an almost identical image in the third of Berkeley's Dialogues entre Hylas et Philonous. It is yet another strange coincidence. Victor Crastre considers the idea that Nadja's role here is that of a medium, "se bornant à refléter les images mentales de son partenaire",<sup>1</sup> which is an interesting possibility; it might help to

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1. André Breton, Trilogie surréaliste, p. 34.

explain some of the curious phrases she utters. However, the particular connection and difference between Breton's thought and that of Berkeley has been demonstrated clearly by Ferdinand Alquié in his Philosophie du Surréalisme:

"Et l'on sait combien Breton est sensible à la beauté de la philosophie de Berkeley qui, niant l'existence de la matière, est une philosophie de la déréalisation. Mais alors que le métaphysicien subit la déception de ce que Breton appelle le 'peu de réalité', et tente d'établir sur des bases solides le monde qu'il sent lui échapper, le surréaliste tente volontairement de provoquer l'effondrement du donné. Il tend à produire une 'crise fondamentale de l'objet', à 'dépayser la sensation', et cette tâche de désintégration est la première qu'il propose à ce qu'il nomme la poésie."<sup>1</sup>

To return to the comparison between the fountain and thought, however, though astonishingly apt and, moreover, extremely beautiful, it does bring together distant realities and gives new vigour to the idea underlying the explanation of the title Poisson soluble;<sup>2</sup> and the fountain, because of the basic fact that water is commonly regarded as the feminine element, in its delicate play evokes the thoughts of a woman, or perhaps the thoughts of a poet, thoughts which rely on intuition, emotion, the spontaneous and even irrational reaction to a given situation rather than on calculation, logic and reason. The development and explanation by Nadja of this image makes it appear conventional, despite the fact that the "jet d'eau" and "pensée" belong to very different semantic areas.

On account of the particular form and style of the book, some

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1. op.cit., pp.107-108.

2. In the first Manifeste du Surréalisme Breton writes as follows about the fascinating title he selected for the accompanying series of automatic texts: "POISSON SOLUBLE, n'est-ce pas moi le poisson soluble, je suis né sous le signe des Poissons et l'homme est soluble dans sa pensée!" (M 49)

of its other images likewise have a conventional air. When Breton tried to portray the essence of Nadja (cf. supra, p.201) , he wrote of her "yeux de fougère" and "les battements d'ailes de l'espoir". Though the former belongs to the category of images in which the two terms are linked by the preposition "de", this is not the important aspect: it is the content rather than the form which really matters, and the comparison between the eyes and a fern is readily comprehensible: Breton is struck by the long and delicate eyelashes, by the bold sweep of the eyebrows, and the motif of a fern captures splendidly these characteristics. Whereas when Baudelaire relates the motif of beating wings to the theme of hope in Quand le ciel bas et lourd pèse comme un couvercle....., he is evoking a bat and a desperate final struggle to stave off the crushing mood of spleen, Breton's image is far more pleasant and far more optimistic: the note of revolt is still there, but the reader thinks inevitably of a bird, an archetypal symbol of freedom, taking wing, and the adjective "immense" reinforces this impression, since it suggests a great bird, perhaps an eagle, the symbol of majesty and triumph. Despite Nadja's sad fate, the beginning of hope, revealed in her very name, is not destroyed in Breton.

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Nadja brings an interesting development in Breton's career as a writer, just as the Nadja episode was of considerable import in his life. Yet if this book is studied in isolation - or if it had not been followed in the course of the next decade by Les Vases communicants and L'Amour fou - its real significance probably would not become apparent. One would dismiss it as a récit, for that, at first sight, is what it is; one would not appreciate the importance of its



signs and indices, one would not contemplate regarding it as a new kind of poetry.

Nadja sees the emergence of "le hasard objectif" as a major Surrealist theme, a theme which will again be important in L'Amour fou, where Breton will show how, in fact, objective chance brought him a new bride, as well as being instrumental in the search for Surrealist objects which become a new art-form. "Le hasard objectif" is part of the process whereby Poetry makes its incursion into everyday life. Nadja herself is an image, a symbol, of the "surréal"; oppressed and rooted to the Earth by her material conditions, yet always on the fringe of an "au-delà"; in her being are fused dream and reality, madness and reason. She is a mediatrix for Breton between the real and the surreal. She is a symbol of "La Poésie", in the Surrealists' understanding of the word, the manifestation of the new, the surprising, the irrational, the inexplicable. Nadja is a translation into words of this search for the poetry latent in everyday existence. Les Vases communicants and L'Amour fou, though their manifest subject-matter may be different from that of Nadja, operate on a similar basis.

## CHAPTER TWO

### "LES VASES COMMUNICANTS" (1932)

The explicit subject-matter of Les Vases communicants is the connection between dream and reality. It has been seen already that Breton touched on this question in the first Manifeste and, in fact, defined "la surréalité" as an absolute reality, born of the fusion of dream and reality (cf. supra, pp. 65-66). In the first Manifeste Breton makes his first examination of the dream-state and discusses some of Freud's discoveries. Les Vases communicants, however, takes up these questions in earnest and the whole of the book revolves around Breton's personal exploration and evocation of the interrelation of dream and reality. Because of this we propose to discuss the main points more or less in the order in which Breton presents them. In this way the basic character of Les Vases communicants will be preserved, the different approaches to dream and reality will be demonstrated, the links between this principal theme and the subordinate themes will become immediately apparent and the imagery, even though it is less important here than in the remaining works of the "quartet", will be studied in its context. Furthermore, this method of analyzing Les Vases communicants should reveal and emphasize the significance of the alternation between the dream-aspect and the reality-aspect. Separate surveys, one after the other, of dream, reality, their interpenetration, Breton's search for a new love, social injustice and the need for revolution, the role of the poet, theoretical observations on the image, would have the effect of isolating what Breton is at great pains to bring together. So we are making the structure of this chapter mirror the structure of Les Vases communi-

cants. On the surface the first part of the book is devoted to dreams, but even there Breton starts to relate dreams to reality; on the surface the second part of the book is devoted to Breton's waking hours, but in this section Breton makes frequent and different comparisons with dreams, so that by the time he reaches the final part of the book the reader is prepared for the ever closer links Breton establishes between dream and reality and for his evocation of their fusion in an ideal, surreal existence.

Breton begins with a general survey of the state of man's study and knowledge of dreams. He mentions the Marquis d'Hervey-Saint-Denis' Les Rêves et les Moyens de les diriger - Observations pratiques and the theories of Freud and Havelock Ellis, together with his own criticism of them. He speaks near the beginning of the book of the possibility of reconciling the worlds of dream and reality, and one deduces at once the significance of the title-image.

Breton discusses whether it might be possible to influence the content of dreams, he mentions the "piètres 'clés des songes' " generally available in bookshops and refers to the summary dismissal of the importance of dreams by both Kant and Hegel. He was amazed that there was still a lack of rudimentary knowledge about dreams, for example what happens in dreams to concepts of time and space, the principle of causality and how much time one spends dreaming during an average night's sleep.

He proceeds to take Freud to task over some of the latter's theories. He cannot comprehend why even Freud could declare:

"..... la 'réalité psychique' est une forme d'existence particulière qu'il ne faut pas confondre avec la 'réalité matérielle'."  
(V 22)

Breton goes on with the very significant claim:



"Freud se trompe encore très certainement en concluant à la non-existence du rêve prophétique - je veux parler du rêve engageant l'avenir immédiat - tenir exclusivement le rêve pour révélateur du passé étant nier la valeur du mouvement. Il est à remarquer qu'Havelock Ellis, dans sa critique du rêve-réalisation de désir chez Freud ne fait, en lui opposant une théorie du rêve-peur, que souligner chez Freud et chez lui le manque à peu près complet de conception dialectique."  
(ibid.)

The real starting-point for Breton's own investigation into dreams, given the absence of sufficient irrefutable documentation, is his assumption, until he had proof to the contrary, that "l'activité psychique s'exercerait dans le sommeil d'une façon continue." (V 27) Breton is convinced that it is necessary to adopt such a position in order that his aim should be fulfilled: that proper recognition should be granted to the place of dreams in human life. Breton feels it must be quite obvious that man needs to dream.<sup>1</sup>

He considers the links between dreaming and certain mental disorders and ponders how a study of dreams could be used to understand the basic needs and aspirations of the dreamer.

He explains that he is going to test the latest theories and decides that the most convenient subject to use is himself. He proposes to employ Freud's method of dream-interpretation, because he considers it to be the most important aspect of Freud's work and also because it is a practical proposition. Before commencing, he points to two weaknesses in Freud's own examinations in this area: firstly, Freud's "pudeur", which gives one the impression that sexual pre-occupations play no role in Freud's own dreams, despite the latter's claims concerning the importance of sex for the subconscious; secondly, the dreams Freud interprets, apart from his own, are largely the

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1. Recent research suggests that this need to dream is not a requirement of man alone, but that if certain animals are prevented from dreaming, they die within a matter of weeks, if not of days.

dreams of sick people and even of people of a hysterical disposition, i.e. subjects who are very impressionable and who are liable to add material to their dream-narrations.

Breton describes two of his dreams. His conclusions regarding the first part of his dream of August 26th 1931 are that it sought to rid him of a real source of anxiety, which was based on

".... la difficulté morale où je me suis trouvé durant des mois de surprendre comment, de cette conception de l'amour limité à un seul être, conception dont j'ai fait état dans la note explicative et qui ne saurait humainement survivre à mon amour pour cet être, je puis passer à une conception différente sans perdre toute valeur à mes propres yeux." (V 47)

Earlier Breton had confided that

"L'année 1931 s'est ouverte pour moi sur des perspectives extrêmement sombres. Le coeur était au mauvais fixe..... X n'était plus là, il n'était plus vraisemblable qu'elle y fût jamais et pourtant j'avais longtemps espéré la retenir toujours..... Ainsi en allait-il d'une certaine conception de l'amour unique, réciproque, réalisable envers et contre tout que je m'étais faite dans ma jeunesse." (V 38)

X was the new love who had appeared at the end of Nadja. The image of the barometer, "Le coeur était au mauvais fixe", represents in a simple way the concept of signs and indices in everyday life which have to be read and deciphered.

As Breton analyses his dream, he sees nothing in it which cannot be explained with reference to his "real" life, the activity of his waking hours. He comes to the conclusion that a prime purpose of dreaming is to eliminate that part of the past which one is least able to assimilate consciously.

The second dream dated from April 5th 1931 and is an example of the utilization of the dream within a dream, which Stekel had been the first to work out; the purpose of this is to eliminate from the dream its most authentic, its most real character. Indeed, in the hallucination created by the taking of hashish in the dream Breton

insists twice on the remarkable air of reality:

"Quelle impression extraordinaire de réalité!"

and

"C'est la réalité même, la réalité absolue...." (V 71, 72)

It is significant that the feeling of "la réalité absolue" occurs when, in a dream, one has the impression of a vivid reality, i.e. when there is a fusion of dream and reality.

In the second section of the book Breton makes a detailed examination of his activities in his waking hours during what was for him a very troubled period between the 5th and the 24th of April 1931, when he was still extremely upset at the loss of X. Breton compares both individual incidents and his whole way of life during that period with a dream, (V 92) thus continuing to fuse together the two themes of dream and reality.

In this section, apparently dealing with reality, Breton is preoccupied with the problem of finding a new love. The section opens with Breton and Eluard sitting in a café in the Place Blanche, trying to interpret the former's dream of the previous night (the hashish dream), when Breton notices a young woman. He is attracted by her eyes, as one has come to expect. She is, however, in the company of an older man. Breton has the impression that they are circus artistes.

At this point in the book Breton brings in further subordinate themes, which belong to the "reality" side of the diptych - social injustice and revolution -, for he detects in the couple

"..... un abîme de misère et d'injustice sociales qui est, en effet, celui qu'on côtoie chaque jour dans les pays capitalistes."  
(V 81)

Breton is very concerned about social injustice at this period of his



life and proceeds to cite this as the chief cause of the ending of his affair with X:

"J'étais mû, pour autant que je sache, à cette époque, par l'angoisse où me laissait la disparition d'une femme que je n'appellerai d'aucun nom, pour ne pas la désobliger, sur sa demande. Cette angoisse tenait essentiellement à l'impossibilité où je me trouvais de faire la part des raisons de caractère social qui avaient pu nous séparer, à jamais, comme alors je le savais déjà." (V 81-82)

Breton talks about the profound, immense despair this separation created in him, a despair which will be seen again in the poems of Le revolver à cheveux blancs. Breton is convinced that it would have required a radical change in the structure and organization of society to have made his love for X a practical proposition. His refusal to compromise and accept the limitations imposed by a regular job, his refusal to accept what he would regard as "bourgeois" values, meant that he was not really in a position to marry. The money secured by selling the odd painting or two was hardly sufficient for survival.<sup>1</sup>

Breton meditates on the difficulties involved in trying to make the acquaintance of suitable women. He is unable to make contact with the young woman although she returned to the café in the Place Blanche two or three times. Breton explicitly compares this kind of episode with a dream, for she disappears from the scene as suddenly as she had appeared, to be replaced by someone else. She had remained intangible, silent, elusive, like a figure in a dream. She is replaced for a while in Breton's thoughts by another girl he met in the street, in another chance encounter. This new girl is a dancer, and like Nadja on the afternoon Breton met her, her

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1. When Breton eventually does remarry, he is faced with the same acute problem; for a while he agrees to run an art-gallery, then to give a series of lectures in Mexico.

appearance indicates at once that she is poor:

".... comme il le fallait sans doute à cette époque de ma vie, je l'ai dit, pour que toute l'émotion dont je suis capable à la vue d'une femme entrât en jeu...." (V 92-93)

She reminds him of the girl who inspired the famous line of the poem by Charles Cros, Liberté: "Amie éclatante et brune", and also of Gustave Moreau's Dalila, a photograph of which Breton includes in Les Vases communicants. The significance of this latter resemblance will be seen shortly.

When Breton reveals that the girl let him accompany her to a "charcuterie", where she bought some gherkins, one is struck at first by the sheer banality and pathos of the situation, but then its real import becomes apparent: this is precisely the kind of incident which is magnified or distorted or featured in a dream.

Although the girl fails to turn up to see Breton the next day as they had arranged, she had helped to put Breton back on the right course: she had given him fresh hope:

"La vie avait pour moi repris un sens et même le meilleur sens qu'elle pût avoir." (V 98)

Like Nadja before her, this girl acts as a herald and a sign. Though Breton was not to know at the time, his next wife was to be a kind of dancer.

Suddenly he changes the subject: he reflects on the course he and his friends had taken and this leads him to make an important pronouncement about Surrealism, which brings him back to the book's manifest main theme:

"Le surréalisme, tel qu'à plusieurs nous l'aurons conçu durant des années, n'aura dû être considéré comme existant qu'à la non-spécialisation a priori de son effort. Je souhaite qu'il passe pour n'avoir tenté rien de mieux que de jeter un fil conducteur entre les mondes par trop dissociés de la veille et du sommeil, de la réalité extérieure et intérieure, de la raison et de la folie, du calme de la connaissance et de l'amour, de la vie pour la vie et de la révolution, etc." (V 104-105)

Breton, therefore, is still thinking in terms of the breaking down of the old barriers between opposites which is an essential part of his concept of "la surréalité" and which complies, too, with the desire expressed in the Second Manifeste for the "occultation" of Surrealism. On the other hand, Breton appears to be looking back on the movement; he seems to be standing at the crossroads; he has witnessed the break-up of the original Surrealist group, and it was perhaps too early for him to know for sure whether the influx of new blood (Dali and Char, for example) would be sufficient compensation for the loss of men such as Artaud, Desnos, Soupault and Aragon (the last-named was expelled in 1932). At that moment Breton appears to envisage things as much from the point of view of the social revolutionary as from that of the Surrealist.

He mentions a couple of incidents which just fall short of being examples of real coincidences. Though he does not talk in so many words of the theme of objective chance, it does dominate these dream-like days. Breton is even more "disponible" than he had been in Nadja; now there is no wife in the background; he is making himself available for the chance encounter; he is on the watch for coincidences. One day he is stopped by a man who begs the money for a métro ticket; the next day Eluard shows him a story in the Journal about the arrest of five people on charges of robbing rich foreigners or people from the provinces. The other anecdote is based on the connection between Moreau's painting Dalila and the receipt of a favourable review of the Second Manifeste written by an old friend, Samson by name. (v. supra, p.227)

The theme of the search for a woman is resumed, and the place of the next encounter is once more a café, and the girl, significantly,



is another dancer. Breton's description of the café, calling to mind very similar descriptions in Aragon's Le Paysan de Paris, sees the return of the theme of "le merveilleux moderne".

Breton analyses a strange phrase, which had come to him in the same way as the famous phrase of the first Manifeste. This particular one runs:

"Dans les régions de l'extrême Extrême-Nord, sous les lampes qui filent..... erre, en t'attendant, Olga." (V 121-122)

Breton relates this phrase to the last line of Rimbaud's Voyelles he had read just two days previously:

"O l'Oméga, rayon violet de Ses Yeux."

He reveals that, as an adolescent, he had fallen in love with a girl of Russian origin, named Olga. At work here is something very similar to T.S. Eliot's "unpredictable crystallizations", the consequences of largely unconscious, subterranean developments of experiences:

"Why, for all of us, out of all that we have heard, seen, felt, in a lifetime, do certain images recur, charged with emotion, rather than others? The song of one bird, the leap of one fish, at one particular place and time, the scent of one flower, an old woman on a German mountain path, six ruffians seen through an open window playing cards at night at a small French railway junction where there was a water-mill: such memories may have symbolic value, but of what we cannot tell, for they come to represent the depths of feeling into which we cannot peer." <sup>1</sup>

Breton, however, feels he does understand Olga's symbolic value here, for her name returns to represent his search for a new love. In the middle of April Breton had been reminded of Olga by a picture on a postcard: he had seen the phrase, "l'extrême Extrême-Nord", in the Journal des Poètes of April 18th.

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1. The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism: Studies in the Relation of Criticism to Poetry in England, London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1959 ed., p.148.

At last he comes to the main point, to which the whole of this central section of the book has been leading:

"Il doit être impossible, en considérant ce qui précède, de ne pas être frappé de l'analogie qui existe entre l'état que je viens de décrire pour avoir été le mien à cette époque et l'état de rêve, tel qu'on le conçoit généralement." (V 126-127)

Yet despite the analogies between dream and reality, Breton is quite aware of their basic difference, and he quotes Pascal to sum up the question:

"Personne n'a d'assurance hors la foi s'il veille ou s'il dort; vu que durant le sommeil on ne croit pas moins fermement veiller qu'en veillant effectivement..... qui sait si cette autre moitié de la vie où nous pensons veiller n'est pas un sommeil un peu différent du premier, dont nous nous éveillons quand nous pensons dormir?" (V 130-131)

Breton amuses himself by poking fun at Pascal in this way: he is not of the opinion that one has the impression of sleeping when one is awake! He is, of course, being unfair to Pascal, since in this "pensée" Pascal is merely citing arguments of the Pyrrhonians.

Breton then explains his reason for talking about this particular period of his life rather than any other: it was unusually irrational and therefore more like a dream than a normal period of one's life:

"De ce rêve éveillé, trainant sur plusieurs jours, le contenu manifeste était, à première vue, à peine plus explicite que celui d'un rêve endormi." (V 132)

The similarity is especially noticeable by virtue of the way in which desire seeks the object of its realization in both the dream and the state Breton has been describing. This latter fact in particular and the question of the interpretation of dreams in general lead Breton to think in terms of the image and to return to his basic ideas about the image:

"On finira bien par admettre, en effet, que tout fait image et que le moindre objet, auquel n'est pas assigné un rôle symbolique particulier, est susceptible de figurer n'importe quoi. L'esprit est d'une merveilleuse promptitude à saisir le plus faible rapport qui peut exister entre deux objets pris au hasard et les poètes savent qu'ils peuvent toujours, sans crainte de tromper, dire de l'un qu'il est comme l'autre: la seule hiérarchie qu'on puisse établir des poètes ne peut même reposer que sur le plus ou moins de liberté dont ils ont fait preuve à cet égard." (V 133)

Breton is thus drawing very close to Eluard's idea, "Tout est comparable à tout."<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, Breton makes a point that is of considerable significance as far as his imagery is concerned. In his poetry it is particularly noticeable that he uses a new, very specialized vocabulary (exotic or unusual botanical and zoological terms, for example) and these words do not already possess a symbolical role or meaning. The idea, "le moindre objet ..... est susceptible de figurer n'importe quoi", paves the way for the discovery which is the basis of the "jeu de l'un dans l'autre". In an important footnote, Breton goes on in the same vein, again stating this basic aspect of his theory of the image:

"Comparer deux objets aussi éloignés que possible l'un de l'autre, ou par toute autre méthode, les mettre en présence d'une manière brusque et saisissante, demeure la tâche la plus haute à laquelle la poésie puisse prétendre. En cela doit tendre de plus en plus à s'exercer son pouvoir inégalable, unique, qui est de faire apparaître l'unité concrète des deux termes mis en rapport et de communiquer à chacun d'eux, quel qu'il soit, une vigueur qui lui manquait tant qu'il était pris isolément. Ce qu'il s'agit de briser, c'est l'opposition toute formelle de ces deux termes; ce dont il s'agit d'avoir raison, c'est de leur apparente disproportion qui ne tient qu'à l'idée imparfaite, infantile qu'on se fait de la nature, de l'extériorité du temps et de l'espace. Plus l'élément de dissemblance immédiate paraît fort, plus il doit être surmonté et nié. C'est toute la signification de l'objet qui est en jeu. Ainsi deux corps différents, frottés l'un contre l'autre, atteignent par l'étincelle, à leur unité suprême dans le feu: ainsi le fer et l'eau parviennent à leur résolution commune, dans le sang, etc....." (V 133, note 1)

In 1932, therefore, Breton is still talking in the terms employed in the first Manifeste, even if he appears to have dropped

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1. Eluard, P., Donner à voir, Paris: Gallimard, 1939, p.134.



his earlier distinction between the simile and the metaphor, though, as we have seen, it is not until 1947 that Breton formally gives the two types of image an equal ranking. Moreover, Breton adds to the concept of comparison present in both simile and metaphor that of simple juxtaposition (cf. *supra*, p.12 ). As images such as "Pneus pattes de velours" (CM 43) are to be found in the earliest Surrealist text, Les Champs magnétiques, Breton could easily have set up juxtaposition as a surrealist image and included it in the list in the 1924 Manifeste. As soon as the two terms are juxtaposed and compared, their new value as a unit, as an image, begins to replace their former independent values. At the end of the above quotation one finds examples of this in the fusion of different elements, which recalls the "marriage of opposites", the ideal of the alchemists and the occultists alike.

There is an indication that Breton's ideas on the poetic image were, at that point in time, falling into a more general pattern or a more general system. The emphasis on the juxtaposition of two disparate or even opposite phenomena in one metaphor follows the same basic principle as the resolution of the old antinomies Breton demands in both the Second Manifeste du Surréalisme and Les Vases communicants. The truly surrealist image, like the state of "surréalité", depends on the comparison, juxtaposition or fusion of opposites or near-opposites. The arbitrary image is to play its part in the "occultation" of Surrealism Breton now desires. Without mentioning the words themselves, Breton is suggesting the importance of the perception of analogies between apparently dissimilar things, particularly when he writes of "faire apparaître l'unité concrète des deux termes mis en rapport." Of course, the importance of

analogy is a well-known aspect of esoteric philosophy; and the principle of "correspondances" was common to the doctrines of the medieval cabbala, to the beliefs of Swedenborg, before becoming part of the poetics of many of the great poets of the nineteenth century.

Then Breton picks up the thread abandoned earlier in the text, the loss of X, thus blurring the distinctions between one theme and another, an effect which he is always very desirous of achieving in Les Vases communicants. He is prompted by thoughts of her and of the situation which was responsible for their separation to envisage a world where men would be able to love without being obliged to take into account social and financial matters.. Remembering Rimbaud's famous battle-cry, "L'amour est à réinventer", he proclaims:

"L'amour humain est à réédifier, comme le reste: je veux dire qu'il peut, qu'il doit être rétabli sur ses vraies bases."  
(V 142)

He closes the second section of the book by quoting a similar wish expressed by Engels; and, like Engels, he believes that this wish can be granted only after the capitalist system has been swept away.

The final section of Les Vases communicants continues where the second left off, with Breton's thoughts turned to political, revolutionary problems. Breton claims that the duty of the intellectual at that time was to

"..... s'efforcer d'agir sur le prolétariat pour élever son niveau de conscience en tant que classe et développer sa combativité." (V 148)

As he had earlier related the question of love to fundamental social questions, he does likewise with the problem of suicide, and expresses his belief that a complete social transformation was

required to eradicate both problems.

Finally Breton returns yet again to the book's main theme and main image: the symbol of the two "vases communicants", i.e. dream and reality. He reintroduces the theme with an anecdote about Napoleon - the epitome of the man of action - who, after entering Pavia, went to its university and asked the Ideology class to define the differences between "la veille" and "le sommeil". In a very lyrical and optimistic passage Breton evokes both the necessity and the importance of sleep and dreams and a world in which man will play his true role:

"Soustrait aux contingences de temps et de lieu, il apparaît vraiment comme le pivot de ce tourbillon même, comme le médiateur par excellence. Et comment me le concilierais-je si je ne le restituais essentiellement à cette faculté fondamentale qui est de dormir, c'est-à-dire de se retremper, chaque fois qu'il est nécessaire, au sein même de cette nuit surabondamment peuplée dans laquelle tous, êtres comme objets, sont lui-même, participent obligatoirement de son être éternel, tombant avec la pierre, volant avec l'oiseau..... Tout théoriquement arraché que je le veux à la mêlée sociale, distrait de la morsure d'une ambition irréfrénable et toujours indigne, je m'assure que le monde entier se recompose, dans son principe essentiel, à partir de lui." (V 168-169)

Such a society, in which man lives in perfect harmony with his surroundings, will be evoked by Breton over a decade later in one of his major poems, the Ode à Charles Fourier.

Breton thus sees sleep as the means by which man recovers his strength, sapped during the waking hours, not just because sleep is a period of rest but also because it is the time when we dream; and Breton suspects, as modern research in fact indicates, that dreaming is absolutely essential to human life.

He then explains very clearly what had been the purpose of writing Les Vases communicants, in the crucial passage of the book:

"Il m'a paru et il me paraît encore, c'est même tout ce dont ce livre fait foi, qu'en examinant de près le contenu de l'activité la plus irréfléchie de l'esprit, si l'on passe outre



à l'extraordinaire et peu rassurant bouillonnement qui se produit à la surface, il est possible de mettre à jour un tissu capillaire dans l'ignorance duquel on s'ingénierait en vain à vouloir se figurer la circulation mentale. Le rôle de ce tissu est, on l'a vu, d'assurer l'échange constant qui doit se produire dans la pensée entre le monde extérieur et le monde intérieur, échange qui nécessite l'interpénétration continue de l'activité de veille et de l'activité de sommeil. Toute mon ambition a été de donner ici un aperçu de sa structure." (V 169-170)

Talking in terms of an exchange between the inner and outer worlds, Breton is, of course, speaking the very language of esoteric tradition, the idea of "correspondances". The main point, however, is Breton's desire for a constant exchange and interaction of the states of dream and reality, or, in other words, an interpenetration of the waking state and the state of sleep, by a process analogous to that of "vases communicants". The symbol of the communicating vessels, in which the level of the liquid is the same in each one (which suggests that equal importance ought to be given to dream and reality) is here supplemented by the new image of the capillary tissue, but though there is a movement from the domain of physics to that of biology, the effect remains the same: the new image also evokes a constant interchange, for the idea of the "tissu capillaire" evokes the very fine blood-vessels, the "capillaires", whose walls allow for "les échanges nutritifs et gazeux" between the blood and cells.

Breton then returns to the secondary theme of the book, the need for a complete change in the social structure. Thus he is practising what he has been preaching, for in Les Vases communicants on the one hand he is making a study of dreams and on the other hand he is demanding a radical social and political transformation, and there is in this book a constant movement from one of these aspects to the other.

The book closes with Breton's remarks on the special role he feels the poet ought to play. After he has placed his faith in Revolution as a means to his greater end, "la connaissance de la destination éternelle de l'homme en général" (V 170), Breton claims that man must try everything at his disposal in his search for this kind of knowledge. He feels that in addition to continuing to use established methods of learning and discovery man should seek new ones; and so he is prompted to return once more to his old hobby-horse:

"Encore une fois, rien ne serait, à cet égard, plus nécessaire que de porter un examen approfondi sur le processus de formation des images dans le rêve, en s'aidant de ce qu'on peut savoir, par ailleurs, de l'élaboration poétique." (V 172)

Perhaps he attaches too much importance to the study of dreams, but it is a field of investigation for which he feels well qualified, since his suspicion that the formation of dream-images must be similar to the process whereby poetic images are formed means that the poet, and especially a poet like Breton himself, who has devoted so much time and thought to the particular question of the formation of the poetic image, must be equipped for such a task. In support of this argument he quotes Freud, who likewise had realized the importance of the role poets could play here:

".... ils (les poètes) sont, dans la connaissance de l'âme, nos maîtres à nous, hommes vulgaires, car ils s'abreuvent à des sources que nous n'avons pas encore rendues accessibles à la science. Que le poète ne s'est-il prononcé plus nettement encore en faveur de la nature, pleine de sens, des rêves!"  
(V 177, note 1)

This paves the way for the famous prediction with which the final paragraph of Les Vases communicants begins, where Breton foresees the poet of the future meeting both his own demands and desires and those of Freud in this domain:

"Le poète à venir surmontera l'idée déprimante du divorce irréparable de l'action et du rêve. Il tendra le fruit magnifique de l'arbre aux racines enchevêtrées et saura persuader ceux qui le goûtent qu'il n'a rien d'amer. Porté par la vague de son temps, il assumera pour la première fois sans détresse la réception et la transmission des appels qui se pressent vers lui du fond des âges. Il maintiendra coûte que coûte en présence les deux termes du rapport humain par la destruction duquel les conquêtes les plus précieuses deviendraient instantanément lettre morte: la conscience objective des réalités et leur développement interne en ce que, par la vertu du sentiment individuel d'une part, universel d'autre part, il a jusqu'à nouvel ordre de magique. Ce rapport peut passer pour magique en ce sens qu'il consiste dans l'action inconsciente, immédiate, de l'interne sur l'externe et que se glisse aisément dans l'analyse sommaire d'une telle notion l'idée d'une médiation transcendante qui serait, du reste, plutôt celle d'un démon que d'un dieu. Le poète se dressera contre cette interprétation simpliste du phénomène en cause: au procès immémorialement intenté par la connaissance rationnelle à la connaissance intuitive, il lui appartiendra de produire la pièce capitale qui mettra fin au débat. L'opération poétique, dès lors, sera conduite au grand jour ....." (V 178-179)

These sentences become the platform not only for "le poète à venir" but also for Breton himself, and they contain the quintessence of Breton's poetics, the constant juxtaposition of "la conscience objective des réalités et leur développement interne". Furthermore, we see once again Breton's conception of the poet's duty as being the reception and transmission, on this occasion, of mysterious "appels..... du fond des âges", a phrase which seems to suggest his delving into a collective unconscious or perhaps into long-lost secrets, of forgotten analogies or arcane knowledge.

Just before the final paragraph Breton employs a magnificent complex image, firstly to evoke the reason why man must sleep and dream - to replenish his forces for the new day - and secondly to suggest that dreaming should not be confined to the night; this is a new vision, a new version of one of Breton's favourite images, dawn breaking over Paris:

"..... Comment se croire à même de voir, d'entendre, de toucher si l'on refuse de tenir compte de ces possibilités innombrables, qui, pour la plupart des hommes, cessent de s'offrir dès le premier roulement de voiture du laitier! L'essence générale de la subjectivité, cet immense terrain et le plus riche de tous est laissé en friche. Il faut aller voir de bon matin, du haut de la colline du Sacré-Coeur, à Paris, la ville se dégager lentement de ses voiles splendides, avant d'étendre les bras..... La beauté féminine se fond



une fois de plus dans le creuset de toutes les pierres rares. Elle n'est jamais plus émouvante, plus enthousiasmante, plus folle, qu'à cet instant où il est possible de la concevoir unanimement détachée du désir de plaire à l'un ou à l'autre, aux uns ou aux autres. Beauté sans destination immédiate, sans destination connue d'elle-même, fleur inouïe faite de tous ces membres épars dans un lit qui peut prétendre aux dimensions de la terre! La beauté atteint à cette heure à son terme le plus élevé, elle se confond avec l'innocence, elle est le miroir parfait dans lequel tout ce qui a été, tout ce qui est appelé à être, se baigne adorablement en ce qui va être cette fois. La puissance absolue de la subjectivité universelle, qui est la royauté de la nuit, étouffe les impatientes déterminations au petit bonheur: le chardon non soufflé demeure sur sa construction fameuse, parfaite. Va-t-il faire beau, pleuvra-t-il? Un adoucissement extrême de ses angles fait tout le soin de la pièce occupée, belle comme si elle était vide. Les chevelures infiniment lentes sur les oreillers ne laissent rien à glaner des fils par lesquels la vie vécue tient à la vie à vivre ..... Comme dans un conte de fées cependant, il semble toujours qu'une femme idéale, levée avant l'heure et dans les bouches de qui sera descendue visiblement la dernière étoile, d'une maison obscure va sortir et somnambuliquement faire chanter les fontaines du jour. Paris, tes réserves monstrueuses de beauté, de jeunesse et de vigueur, - comme je voudrais savoir extraire de ta nuit de quelques heures ce qu'elle contient de plus que la nuit polaire! Comme je voudrais qu'une méditation profonde sur les puissances inconscientes, éternelles que tu recèles soit au pouvoir de tout homme, pour qu'il se garde de reculer et de subir! La résignation n'est pas écrite sur la pierre mouvante du sommeil. L'immense toile sombre qui chaque jour est filée porte en son centre les yeux médusants d'une victoire claire." (V 173-176)

The night is over, and Breton has emerged from the darkness and despair. Paris has brought to him the splendid image of a woman rising, and just as Nadja ended with the evocation of new love, so this great image at the end of Les Vases communicants is a prelude to L'Amour fou. Paris is no longer the dreary backcloth, but a beautiful woman who calls and reaches out for Breton. This image of the dawn shows Breton refreshed like Paris, awaiting the new day, the future, with an enthusiasm in marked contrast to the earlier image of the "coeur au mauvais fixe". With the coming of the dawn, as with the coming of new love, Breton can tap again the reservoirs of lyricism, found singularly wanting in the rest of the

book. It is only here that the analogies Breton perceives in the various signs and indices presented to him are translated into fine imagery. Elsewhere, if they are read at all, they are not deciphered. Even more than Nadja, Les Vases communicants seems to indicate that this new poetic genre Breton has created can be very unpoetic, in the conventional sense of the word, for at this stage it is by no means rich in images and is not noticeable for any great lyrical quality. L'Amour fou and Arcane 17 change things, however, for in these two later works the image finds a special niche, and one can accept with good grace that they must be considered in any study of Breton's poetry.

### CHAPTER THREE

#### "L'AMOUR FOU" (1937)

Midway through the book Breton makes known his state of mind and the preoccupations which helped to determine the nature and themes of L'Amour fou:

"Je venais d'écrire quelques jours plus tôt le texte inaugural de ce livre, texte qui rend assez bien compte de mes dispositions mentales, affectives d'alors: besoin de concilier l'idée de l'amour unique et sa négation plus ou moins fatale dans le cadre social actuel, souci de prouver qu'une solution plus que suffisante, nettement excédante des problèmes vitaux, peut être toujours attendue de l'abandon des voies logiques ordinaires. Je n'ai jamais cessé de croire que l'amour, entre tous les états par lesquels l'homme peut passer, est le plus grand pourvoyeur en matière de solutions de ce genre, tout en étant lui-même le lieu idéal de jonction, de fusion de ces solutions."

(AF 51)

Once more we witness the faith Breton is prepared to place in love as the bringer of solutions, once more we see Breton referring to the importance of "l'abandon des voies logiques ordinaires".

Yet the structure of L'Amour fou is more straightforward than that of the other three books in this series. Each chapter revolves around one basic theme and the analogies Breton detects are worked out in the "cadre" of individual images rather than at the wider, structural level. Consequently the thematic study can, on the whole, be considered with a chapter-by-chapter approach.

The main themes of the opening three chapters, which serve as a prelude to the study of love sparked off by the circumstances of Breton's meeting with Jacqueline Lamba, are built around the concepts of "la beauté convulsive", "le hasard objectif" and "la trouvaille d'objets", though from the outset the question of love lurks in the background and is occasionally brought forward into the discussion, as, for example, when Breton contrasts the Romantic



conception of love with the nature of love as it is determined by social conditions:

"L'histoire ne dit pas que les poètes romantiques, qui semblent pourtant de l'amour s'être fait une conception moins dramatique que la nôtre, ont réussi à tenir tête à l'orage. Les exemples de Shelley, de Nerval, d'Arnim illustrent au contraire d'une manière saisissante le conflit qui va s'aggraver jusqu'à nous, l'esprit s'ingéniant à donner l'objet de l'amour pour un être unique alors que dans bien des cas les conditions sociales de la vie font implacablement justice d'une telle illusion. De là, je crois, en grande partie, le sentiment de la malédiction qui pèse aujourd'hui sur l'homme et qui s'exprime avec une acuité extrême à travers les oeuvres les plus caractéristiques de ces cent dernières années." (AF 9)

This is, of course, one of Breton's idées fixes in the early 1930's, as Les Vases communicants had amply illustrated, and it is clearly explained in large part by the ending of Breton's affair with X.

In the first three chapters of L'Amour fou, however, love is waiting to play its part in the analogical pattern.

The foreground is occupied in the first chapter by the theme of convulsive beauty and by Breton's explanation of this new Surrealist concept. In fact, the phrase was first employed by Breton in the striking and surprising final sentence of Nadja, as we have seen (v. supra, p.203):

"La beauté sera CONVULSIVE ou ne sera pas." (N 187)

After this provocative introduction to the term, there was an interval of nine years before Breton published L'Amour fou, in which the new concept is illustrated in the opening pages in the following manner:

"Le mot 'convulsive', que j'ai employé pour qualifier la beauté qui seule, selon moi, doit être servie, perdrait à mes yeux tout sens s'il était congu dans le mouvement et non à l'expiration exacte de ce mouvement même. Il ne peut, selon moi, y avoir beauté - beauté convulsive - qu'au prix de l'affirmation du rapport réciproque qui lie l'objet considéré dans son mouvement et dans son repos. Je regrette de n'avoir pu fournir, comme complément à l'illustration de ce texte la photographie d'une

locomotive de grande allure qui eût été abandonnée durant des années au délire de la forêt vierge." (AF 13)

The concept is exposed, therefore, in the title of the paintings by E.L.T. Mesens, Mouvement immobile,<sup>1</sup> and can be explained with reference to the fusion of opposites: in this case motion and stability, the dynamic and the static. A secondary feature of the particular example Breton cites, the railway-engine abandoned in a forest, seen by Crastre as the symbol of "un 'modernisme' mort",<sup>2</sup> is the other fundamental Surrealist principle of "dépaysement".

After the initial definitions of "la beauté convulsive" Breton sings the praises of one of its more important motifs, the crystal, and suggests how the attraction of crystals is, for him, based on the concept of spontaneity, which is fundamental to the arbitrary image.

Further embodiments of convulsive beauty cited by Breton - alcyonarians and madrepores - have the particular merit of existing at the frontiers of the animal and plant kingdoms on the one hand and the mineral realm on the other. Breton can speak of them in terms of the fusion of the animate and the inanimate, before adding a third requirement of convulsive beauty:

"Une telle beauté ne pourra se dégager que du sentiment poignant de la chose révélée, que de la certitude procurée par l'irruption d'une solution qui, en raison de sa nature même, ne pouvait nous parvenir par les voies logiques ordinaires. Il s'agit en pareil cas, en effet, d'une solution toujours excédante, d'une solution certes rigoureusement adaptée et pourtant très supérieure au besoin. L'image, telle qu'elle se produit dans l'écriture automatique, en a toujours constitué pour moi un exemple parfait." (AF 15-16)

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1. There are two versions of this subject, both produced in 1960, one in the Tate Gallery and the other in the Galerie Isy Brachot, Brussels.
  2. André Breton, p.98.

This example implies that Breton wished to create convulsive beauty with words - verbal counterparts of the crystal, the alcyonarians and the madrepores - to create a quivering effect, where words would be surrounded by a shimmer of sensations, an aureole of associations, where the words would act like magnetic fields.

After Breton has claimed that the kind of image produced by automatic writing constitutes the perfect example of convulsive beauty, he makes first mention of the "trouvaille d'objets": he speaks of his longing to have constructed an object complying with some whim and then of the thrill of discovering an object which satisfies his original desire. The significance of the relationship between the desire and the discovery is then explained:

"Toujours est-il que le plaisir est ici fonction de la dissemblance même entre l'objet souhaité et la trouvaille. Cette trouvaille, qu'elle soit artistique, scientifique, philosophique ou d'aussi médiocre utilité qu'on voudra, enlève à mes yeux toute beauté à ce qui n'est pas elle. C'est en elle seule qu'il nous est donné de reconnaître le merveilleux précipité du désir. Elle seule a le pouvoir d'agrandir l'univers, de le faire revenir partiellement sur son opacité, de nous découvrir en lui des capacités de recel extraordinaire, proportionnées aux besoins innombrables de l'esprit. La vie quotidienne abonde, du reste, en menues découvertes de cette sorte, où prédomine fréquemment un élément d'apparente gratuité, fonction très probablement de notre incompréhension provisoire, et qui me paraissent par suite des moins dédaignables. Je suis intimement persuadé que toute perception enregistrée de la manière la plus involontaire comme, par exemple, celle de paroles prononcées à la cantonade, porte en elle la solution, symbolique ou autre, d'une difficulté où l'on est avec soi-même." (AF 16)

Therefore such discoveries fulfil the same purpose as the dreams discussed in Les Vases communicants. Breton has very quickly established the links between the new concept of "la beauté convulsive" (and its various manifestations) and the automatic image on the one hand and the "trouvaille" (the precipitate of desire) on the other; and the passage clearly reveals Breton's belief in the



importance of this involuntary perception (of signs, symbols or indices), the significance of which one may be able to work out.

After a section on the consulting of cards and an anecdote about a waitress, Breton closes the first chapter with the famous definition of the new Surrealist theme or concept:

"La beauté convulsive sera érotique-voilée, explosante-fixe, magique-circonstancielle ou ne sera pas." (AF 21)

The important point, borne out by each of these three criteria Breton mentions, is that convulsive beauty, like the state of "surrealité" itself, is found at the point where opposites are fused together. Although the erotic plays an important part in "la beauté convulsive", it is when it is merged with the veiled. It is interesting and perhaps significant, too, that the form of the final definition of "la beauté convulsive" is very reminiscent of the alchemist Khunrath's statement in 1609 that the entry into a sanctuary in which there are seven steps to be climbed, the "seven stages of perfection" in the alchemist's initiation, could be achieved, "Christian-cabbalistically, divino-magically, and even physico-chemically."<sup>1</sup>

The concept of "convulsive beauty" does add an important new dimension, as well as a new term, to the study of Breton's imagery and of his image theories.

Prior to devoting the third chapter to the "trouvaille d'objets", Breton in Chapter II makes a further examination of "le hasard" and "le hasard objectif". This chapter opens with an inquiry he and Eluard had launched, the results of which had been published shortly before in the review, Minotaure:

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1. v. Bessy, M., A Pictorial History of Magic and the Supernatural, p.105.

"Pouvez-vous dire quelle a été la rencontre capitale de votre vie? - Jusqu'à quel point cette rencontre vous a-t-elle donné l'impression du fortuit? du nécessaire?" (AF 22)

This initial reference to "la rencontre capitale" paves the way, of course, for Chapter IV, where Breton describes his encounter with Jacqueline.

After discussing various definitions of "le hasard", starting with Souriau's "la rencontre d'une causalité externe et d'une finalité interne" and culminating with Breton's attempt to reconcile the views of Engels and Freud (v. supra, p.207), Breton is able to link the question of "le hasard" with that of "la beauté convulsive" by referring to the juxtaposition, "magique-circonstancielle":

"Le 'magique-circonstanciel', qu'il s'agissait ici d'éprouver en étendue et d'amener à prendre objectivement conscience de lui-même, ne peut, par définition, se manifester qu'à la faveur d'une analyse rigoureuse et approfondie des circonstances du jeu desquelles il est issu." (AF 26)<sup>1</sup>

The final words of the second chapter relate explicitly the rest of the book to the questions thus raised and reveal Breton's interesting hypothesis:

"Au long de ce livre j'ai eu loisir de préciser le caractère qu'a pris à mes yeux une telle rencontre. Je crois n'avoir pu le faire qu'en raison de ma volonté d'accommodation progressive à cette lumière de l'anomalie dont portent trace mes précédents ouvrages. Ma plus durable ambition aura été de dégager cette inconnue aussi bien que de quelques-uns des faits à première vue les plus humbles que les plus significatifs de ma vie (sic). Je crois avoir réussi à établir que les uns et les autres admettent un commun dénominateur situé dans l'esprit de l'homme

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1. It is perhaps worth recalling the precise meaning of the term "magie": under the heading "magie" in the Grand Larousse Encyclopédique one finds firstly the following explanation: "Art prétendu de produire, au moyen de pratiques occultes, des effets contraires aux lois naturelles", and then under the heading "magie blanche" one finds the significant words: "Art de produire certains effets, merveilleux en apparence, mais qui en réalité, ne sont dus qu'à des causes naturelles." The very mention of the word "merveilleux" takes one to the heart of Surrealism.

et qui n'est autre que son désir. Je ne me suis attaché à rien tant qu'à montrer quelles précautions et quelles ruses le désir, à la recherche de son objet, apporte à louvoyer dans les eaux pré-conscientes et, cet objet découvert, de quels moyens, stupéfiants jusqu'à nouvel ordre, il dispose pour le faire connaître par la conscience." (AF 26-31)

Desire's search for an object, subconscious as well as conscious, clearly motivates the whole of Chapter III, composed around the theme of "la trouvaille d'objets", as it will motivate Chapter IV, the account of Breton's meeting with Jacqueline.

The moment of discovery is connected implicitly by Breton with the surreal "point suprême":

"A la pointe de la découverte, de l'instant où pour les premiers navigateurs une nouvelle terre fut en vue à celui où ils mirent le pied sur la côte, de l'instant où tel savant put se convaincre qu'il venait d'être témoin d'un phénomène jusqu'à lui inconnu à celui où il commença à mesurer la portée de son observation - tout sentiment de durée aboli dans l'enivrement de la chance - un très fin pinceau de feu dégage ou parfait comme rien autre le sens de la vie. C'est à la recreation de cet état particulier de l'esprit que le surréalisme a toujours aspiré, dédaignant en dernière analyse la proie et l'ombre pour ce qui n'est déjà plus l'ombre et n'est pas encore la proie: l'ombre et la proie fondues dans son éclair unique." (AF 32)

Though these symbols of discovery, the navigator and the scientist, are classic, they nonetheless have a force which is matched only by their aptness: though the basic ideas of the images are almost as old as poetry, their particular development gives them an air of freshness.

Breton's characteristic attitude of "disponibilité", "cette soif d'errer à la rencontre de tout" (AF 32), witnessed already in both Nadja and Les Vases communicants, is here fiercely defended and becomes the preface to an account of a visit made by Breton and Giacometti one day in the Spring of 1934, to the Marché aux Puces. At that period Giacometti was working on a female figure Breton found fascinating, precisely because he inter-



preted it as "l'émanation même du désir d'aimer et d'être aimé en quête de son véritable objet humain et dans sa douloureuse ignorance" (AF 33). The figure is then discussed in relation to the idea of fusion:

"Toujours est-il que le visage, si net, si flagrant aujourd'hui, était assez lent à s'éveiller du cristal de ses plans pour qu'on pût se demander s'il livrerait jamais son expression, cette expression par quoi seule pourrait se parachever l'unité du naturel et du surnaturel qui permettrait à l'artiste de passer à autre chose. Il manquait ici une assurance sur la réalité, un point d'appui sur le monde des objets tangibles. Il manquait ce terme de comparaison même lointain qui confère brusquement la certitude." (AF 34).

Breton thus still regards the work of art as being something truly surreal, situated at the watershed of the natural and the supernatural, though the natural, the real, must always be at hand.

The two objects which attract Giacometti and Breton at the Marché aux Puces are respectively a helmet and a wooden spoon, the handle of which was merged with a little shoe. The helmet was to help Giacometti solve the problem the head of the figure had posed, and this leads Breton to come suddenly to a remarkable conclusion about the significance of the discovery of such objects:

"La trouvaille d'objet remplit ici rigoureusement le même office que le rêve, en ce sens qu'elle libère l'individu de scrupules affectifs paralysants, le reconforte et lui fait comprendre que l'obstacle qu'il pouvait croire insurmontable est franchi." (AF 36)

Breton is able to explain his immediate attraction to the wooden spoon by relating it to an object he had previously asked Giacometti to make for him, the mould for a glass slipper of the kind worn by Cinderella, which was in turn connected with a "phrase de réveil" heard by Breton a few months earlier, "le cendrier Cendrillon". Giacometti had not got round to it, however; but when Breton was back home after the visit to the Marché aux Puces, he realized that

the wooden spoon with the shoe at the end of the handle was the object he had been seeking ever since he had heard that phrase. Even the spoon part of the object possessed, for Breton, a special value, for it seemed to represent Cinderella's work in the kitchen prior to the visit from her Fairy Godmother. Breton goes on to bring out the latent sexual significance of the wooden spoon and claims that it now symbolized for him "une femme unique, inconnue", the object of his desire. Later Breton found out a couple of interesting facts about the helmet: firstly, a letter from Joë Bousquet revealed it was one he had distributed to his company the evening before he was wounded; secondly, while Breton and Giacometti had been inspecting it in the Marché aux Puces, they had been observed by X and a friend, who had likewise found it intriguing, but X, like Breton, had finally put it down. Breton feels that the helmet, for him, must therefore stand for the death-instinct, dominant after the loss of the loved one, whereas the spoon represents the sexual instinct; and Breton sees this as proof of Freud's claim:

"Les deux instincts, aussi bien l'instinct sexuel que l'instinct de mort, se comportent comme des instincts de conservation, au sens le plus strict du mot, puisqu'ils tendent l'un et l'autre à rétablir un état qui a été troublé par l'apparition de la vie."  
(AF 46)

Breton's conclusion by this time, however, is that it is not sufficient just to live, but that he must once more begin to love.

Chapter IV brings to Breton his new love, the result of a chance encounter with an "ondine". The theme of love regained dominates the book thenceforth, uniting in itself the preliminary themes.

Breton speaks of the episode he is about to narrate in terms of a revelation; he begins his account very abruptly, thus capturing

the surprise and the suddenness of the young woman's entry into the café:

"Cette jeune femme qui venait d'entrer était comme entourée d'une vapeur - vêtue d'un feu? - Tout se décolorait, se glaçait auprès de ce teint rêvé sur un accord parfait de rouillé et de vert: l'ancienne Egypte, une petite fougère inoubliable rampant au mur intérieur d'un très vieux puits, le plus vaste, le plus profond et le plus noir de tous ceux sur lesquels je me suis penché, à Villeneuve-les-Avignon, dans les ruines splendides du XIV<sup>e</sup> siècle français, aujourd'hui abandonnée aux bohémiens."  
(AF 50)

This décor, with its hint of convulsive beauty in the union of the fern and the ruins, creates the necessary aura for Breton to go on and declare that "..... cette femme était scandaleusement belle."

(AF 50-51)

Breton is at once instinctively aware of the importance of this. When the young woman proposes a rendez-vous later that night, Breton recognizes that not only has desire found the object of its realization, but that the "object", in the shape of the woman, has come half-way to meet him, the embodiment of desire. Jacqueline points out to Breton the Tour Saint-Jacques, unaware of the great attraction it held for him:

"Vous aviez beau savoir que j'aimais cette tour, je revois encore à ce moment toute une existence violente s'organiser autour d'elle pour nous comprendre, pour contenir l'éperdu dans son galop nuageux autour de nous:

A Paris la Tour Saint-Jacques chancelante  
Pareille à un tournesol". (AF 55)

Breton comments on these lines, the opening lines of his poem Vigilance, pointing out the significance of the two senses of the word "tournesol" and its connection with the alchemist's dream of changing base lead into gold. He feels liberated, drawn at last towards the light, and liberating the word in its turn, proclaims lyrically, spontaneously:

"Tourne, sol, et toi, grande nuit, chasse de mon coeur tout ce qui n'est pas la foi en mon étoile nouvelle!" (AF 56)



They reach the Quai aux Fleurs at the moment when the flowers are arriving and Breton regards the profusion of flowers as yet another favourable omen.

The lyrical evocation of the night of his meeting with Jacqueline is then supplanted by a more sober reflection on love, which takes up again the book's initial discussion of the topic. He wants to question thoroughly the whole modern conception of love. Whilst not going as far as Rimbaud and proclaiming that love must be reinvented, Breton demands at least a new attitude to love; furthermore he associates the question of love with other basic preoccupations of the Surrealist movement: the relationship between the "réel" and "l'imaginaire", the whole idea of causality and the notion of "le comportement lyrique". The discussion is then temporarily dropped at this point, as Breton proceeds to discuss and analyse the poem Tournesol with reference to the night of his meeting with Jacqueline. At the end of the chapter, however, just prior to the crisp but lyrical statement announcing his wedding to Jacqueline,<sup>1</sup> Breton reminds the reader of a dialogue recounted at the end of the book's first chapter.

On April 10th, 1934, Breton, lunching in a little restaurant, was attracted by the waitress and her necklace. Suddenly he hears the voice of the dishwasher shouting out what Breton takes to be the exclamation: "Ici, l'Ondine". The reply, however, makes Breton aware of the word-play: "Ah! oui, on le fait ici, l'on dine!" After the fateful meeting with Jacqueline, Breton first alludes to the image of an undine, when he is commenting on the poem Tournesol. Apart from the exclamation of the phrase, "l'air de nager", there is also a reference to the "naïades de Jean Goujon" in the analysis of "le

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1. "Le 14 août suivant, j'épousais la toute-puissante ordonnatrice de la nuit du tournesol." (AF 77)

bal des innocents", but it is only at the end of Chapter IV that Breton describes Jacqueline, in so many words, as "la seule naïade, la seule ondine vivante de cette histoire" and explains the details of the connection between her and the waitress of Chapter I:

"Il ne me reste, pour avoir tout à fait mis en valeur le conditionnement purement spirituel de cette merveilleuse aventure, qu'à ramener vivement l'attention sur le caractère irrationnel du dialogue du 10 avril auquel je fais plus haut allusion et sur le besoin, à peine moins irrationnel, que j'ai éprouvé de le reproduire sans commentaire à la fin d'un texte essentiellement théorique. On voudra bien se reporter à cette scène remarquablement alerte et mystérieuse, dont le déroulement est commandé par ces paroles non moins impératives que dans le poème celles du grillon: 'Ici, l'Ondine'. Tout se passe comme si la seule naïade, la seule ondine vivante de cette histoire, toute différente de la personne interpellée qui, d'ailleurs, sur ces entrefaites, allait disparaître, n'avait pu faire autrement que se rendre à cette sommation et une autre preuve en est qu'elle tenta à cette époque de louer un appartement dans la maison faisant rigoureusement face au restaurant dont il s'agit, avenue Rachel." (AF 77)

Like the connection between the glass slipper Breton wanted Giacometti to make for him and the wooden spoon discovered at the Marché aux Puces, there is a connection between the waitress in the restaurant and Jacqueline. Both relationships illustrate the idea of desire seeking its object and show how apparently trivial things can acquire symbolic significance.

Chapter V is the account of the reactions of Breton and Jacqueline to the Canary Islands, and it is in this chapter that the themes of love and desire are accompanied by the subsidiary theme of paradise regained. It is here, too, that the new strain of exoticism, which had already made its mark in the poems of L'Air de l'Eau, is developed.

The exoticism is present right from the opening image of the chapter:

"Le pic du Teide à Ténérife est fait des éclairs du petit poignard de plaisir que les jolies femmes de Tolède gardent jour et nuit contre leur sein." (AF 78)

It is sustained in the account of the journey up the mountain, in the colour of the scene below, described appropriately in terms of a bull-fight, in the evocation of the sea, in the description of the Orotava valley with its enormous ancient dragon-tree, and, above all, in the final incantatory address to the mountain:

"Teide admirable, prends ma vie! Tourne sous ces mains rayonnantes et fais miroiter tous mes versants. Je ne veux faire avec toi qu'un seul être de ta chair, de la chair des méduses, qu'un seul être qui soit la méduse des mers du désir. Bouche du ciel en même temps que des enfers, je te préfère ainsi énigmatique, ainsi capable de porter aux nues la beauté naturelle et de tout engloutir. C'est mon cœur qui bat dans tes profondeurs inviolables, dans cette aveuglante roseraie de la folie mathématique où tu couves mystérieusement ta puissance. Daignent tes artères, parcourues de beau sang noir et vibrant, me guider longtemps vers tout ce que j'ai à connaître, à aimer, vers tout ce qui doit faire aigrette au bout de mes doigts! Puisse ma pensée parler par toi, par les mille gueules hurlantes d'hermines en quoi tu t'ouvres là-haut au lever du soleil! Toi qui portes vraiment l'arche florale qui ne serait plus l'arche si tu ne tenais suspendue au-dessus d'elle la branche unique du foudroiement, tu te confonds avec mon amour, cet amour et toi vous êtes faits à perte de vue pour vous égriser. Les grands lacs de lumière sans fond succèdent en moi au passage rapide de tes fumerolles. Toutes les routes à l'infini, toutes les sources, tous les rayons partent de toi, Deria-i-Noor et Koh-i-Noor, beau pic d'un seul brillant qui trembles!" (AF 109)

We witness here the birth of a new myth, as Breton transforms the volcano into a pagan goddess, her mouth - because it is a crater - opened towards heaven and hell; and like Goethe's Ganymede Breton wishes to embrace and be one with nature, to blend into her protoplasmic flesh. The image of the "méduse" is likewise inspired by the crater, since the mouth of a jelly-fish is situated in the centre of its lower surface, yet in this word, too, one sees the head of the Gorgon, but this time a benevolent goddess whose gaze simply allures and attracts. The fusion is accomplished and the heart Breton hears beating in the rose-garden depths of the mountain is his own heart. The black lava, which gave its colour to the beaches of Tenerife,



seethes and circulates anew in the image of the fine black blood of Teide's arteries, and the rays of the rising sun, replacing the gases from the volcano, seem to transform the mountain into an enormous diamond, polishing it and illuminating its multiple facets.

This chapter is not long under way, however, before the idea of a paradise is suggested. The beautiful valley of the Orotava with its botanical garden almost immediately conjures up for Breton the story of Alice in Wonderland:

"A peine sommes-nous entrés que tous les petits génies de l'enfance se sont jetés à notre cou. D'une petite fleur à transformation, notre très savant guide M. Bolinaga, qui préside au développement de tout ce faste, n'a, en effet, pas dédaigné de faire bondir sous nos yeux le lapin d'Alice in Wonderland et c'est la table de repas même d'Alice qui se déroule à perte de vue devant nous quand nous eûmes porté à notre bouche la tomate lilliputienne du pitanga, au goût exquis de poison." (AF 83)

The garden has a fairy-tale atmosphere which is the atmosphere of Breton's finest poems, the atmosphere of L'Air de l'Eau and Constellations; but it is next depicted as resembling a dream-world:

"Comme au terme d'un long voyage maritime, les passagers sur le point de débarquer interrogent les surprenantes pièces d'argent et d'or qui vont avoir cours, il est un pays de rêve - la Orotava - dans lequel on vous introduit en glissant dans votre main ces feuilles qui sont la monnaie bouleversante du sentiment." (AF 84)

The garden is superbly beautiful in itself, but the presence of Jacqueline at Breton's side adds to its enchantment. A strange but delicious aura of harmony seems to envelop them, with the result that the image of a Golden Age is not long delayed:

"On n'en sera plus jamais quitte avec ces frondaisons de l'âge d'or, Orphée a passé par là, entraînant côte à côte le tigre et la gazelle. Les lourds serpents se déroulent et choient autour du banc circulaire sur lequel nous sommes assis pour jouir du profond crépuscule qui trouve à midi le moyen de se partager le jardin avec le grand jour." (AF 85)

The image of the serpents, like the subsequent allusion to a fig-tree

(AF 91-92), inevitably calls to mind the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, but here in Tenerife Breton is the new Adam, Jacqueline the new Eve. The whole mood of this description is reminiscent of the jungle paintings of the Douanier Rousseau, especially his Charmeuse de serpents, which will be present in Breton's mind some years later, when his stay in the West Indies prompts him to write Martinique charmeuse de serpents.

After these allusions to a Garden of Eden Breton discusses L'Age d'or, the film made by Buñuel and Dali, which he and Péret would have introduced to the people of the Canaries in May 1935, if they had not been stopped by the censorship imposed by the Spanish government. In L'Amour fou Breton appears to be trying to achieve with words what the film had achieved with visual and aural effects:

"Ce film demeure, à ce jour, la seule entreprise d'exaltation de l'amour total tel que je l'envisage..... Dans un tel amour existe bien en puissance un véritable âge d'or en rupture complète avec l'âge de boue que traverse l'Europe et d'une richesse inépuisable en possibilités futures." (AF 88)

Breton presumably believed that his own new love would create a private Golden Age for his wife as for himself. He predicts, perhaps rather naïvely, that this new Eden will be theirs for the rest of their days:

"De ce paysage passionné qui se retirera un jour prochain avec la mer, si je ne dois enlever que toi aux fantasmagories de l'écume verte, je saurai recréer cette musique sur nos pas. Ces pas bordent à l'infini le pré qu'il nous faut traverser pour revenir, le pré magique qui cerne l'empire du figuier. Je ne découvre en moi d'autre trésor que la clé qui m'ouvre ce pré sans limites depuis que je te connais, ce pré fait de la répétition d'une seule plante toujours plus haute, dont le balancier d'amplitude toujours plus grande me conduira jusqu'à la mort." (AF 92)

In these charming images of magic meadows and the hermetic key of love Breton seems to have reconciled the Romantic concept of love with the nature of love determined by social conditions. The whole

chapter is basically one vast hymn to love, epitomized in one splendid mirror-image:

"L'amour réciproque, tel que je l'envisage, est un dispositif de miroirs qui me renvoient, sous les mille angles que peut prendre pour moi l'inconnu, l'image fidèle de celle que j'aime, toujours plus surprenante de divinations de mon propre désir et plus dorée de vie." (AF 105-106)

Ever new and ever different, but always the same, "l'amour fou" between a man and a woman in the sense in which Breton understands the term, here reaches its apogee.

The study of love is pursued from a different angle in Chapter VI. Breton comes to discover that the mirror of love between two people can be clouded by circumstances totally foreign to their love.

To introduce this new aspect Breton has recourse to a parable taken from classical mythology, the story of the wounding of Venus, from which he draws his obsessive conclusion:

"C'est qu'en effet la passion, aux magnifiques yeux égarés, doit pâtir d'avoir à se mêler à la lutte terrestre." (AF 110)

Breton wonders whether the conjunction of Venus and Mars at the moment of his birth might be held responsible for his rather chequered experiences in love up to that time. He proceeds to examine the causes of the occasional incompatibility of two lovers, and lays the blame on the problems of everyday living rather than on a lessening of love. Breton tells of a visit he and his wife made in July 1936 to Le Fort-Bloqué, a beach near Lorient. They had amused themselves there the previous week by combing the beach for jetsam and other materials with which they might make an "objet-talisman". On the day in question, however, the beach was devoid of interesting objects, and Breton felt temporarily separated from his wife. When he talked about their walk with his parents, he was



informed that he and Jacqueline had been near the Villa du Loch, the house of a certain Michel Henriot, a breeder of silver fox, who had been convicted of the murder of his wife. Breton mentions other coincidences he finds "poetic": firstly, he relates Henriot's fondness for shooting sea-birds to his own throwing of stones at them earlier that afternoon and to the memory of a picture of the young Louis XV massacring birds; secondly, a little fort Breton had found had been the Henriots' provisional home while the Villa du Loch was being built; thirdly, for their holiday Jacqueline had borrowed two books, both of which contained the word "fox" in their titles, and on that day the books lay on the tables on either side of their bed. According to Breton, all these details conspired together:

".....pour provoquer chez nous simultanément un état affectif en totale contradiction avec nos sentiments réels."  
(AF 127)

The final chapter of the book, in the form of a letter to their daughter, Aube, to be read when she is sixteen, leaves behind completely, however, the impression created by Chapter VI that life and love are full of vicissitudes. Breton hopes that Aube will embody the eternal power of Woman, that the words "l'amour fou" will be her guiding principle and ends with the wish:

"Je vous souhaite d'être follement aimée." (AF 137)

The theme of love, of "l'amour fou", is the major theme of the book, and "la beauté convulsive", "le hasard objectif" and "la trouvaille d'objets" are the minor themes. These themes do not cover, however, the whole range of the book's interest and significance. The importance of the imagery in L'Amour fou is such that at times it threatens to eclipse the book's thematic side, in addition to paving the way for certain basic changes in Breton's style

and imagery in the following decade.

Images of the type encountered in Breton's poetry up to this point are to be found in the opening chapters of L'Amour fou: elemental fusions ("L'eau, folle de ses volutes comme une vraie chevelure de feu", AF 9), "phrases de réveil" ("le cendrier Cendrillon", AF 38), blends of the animate and the inanimate ("les cheveux, de pluie claire, sur des marronniers en fleur", AF 53), juxtaposition of vegetable and mineral to create a visual "dépaysement" ("l'émotion qui peut se dégager au spectacle des étoffes végétales lorsqu'elles font vraiment connaissance avec le pavé de la ville", AF 59), images merging the abstract and the concrete ("Toutes les fleurs, à commencer même par les moins exubérantes de ce climat, conjuguent à plaisir leur force comme pour me rendre toute la jeunesse de la sensation", ibid).

The part of the book in which there is the most dense concentration of imagery is Chapter V, inspired by the Canary Islands. On almost every page of this chapter there are extremely striking images. What is of the utmost significance, however, is the fact that the most powerful images are no longer the most arbitrary ones. They may not always differ much in their form from the most characteristic images of the automatic texts of Les Champs magnétiques and Poisson soluble, but the bonds between tenor and vehicle are in general more easily discerned. The opening image has already been quoted, (v. supra, p.251): the evocation of Mt. Teide in terms of the flashing daggers the women of Toledo keep clasped to their bosoms may be original and thrilling, but the reader perceives at once the appropriateness of the image, an appropriateness which resides in the fact that a Spanish mountain, albeit in the Canary Islands, is compared with one of the most conventional mental images of Spain, the

beauties of Toledo, to evoke the exotic and sensuous attraction of the mountain-peak.

Similarly, on the next page, the colourful spectacle of the foothills of the Teide, observed from above, is depicted by Breton with the image of a bullfight:

"On a dépassé la cime des flamboyants et déjà il faut tourner la tête pour voir vaciller leur rampe rose sur ce coin de fable éternelle. L'arène s'est déroulée à son tour selon la volute des chemins poudreux qu'ont remontés le dimanche précédent les acclamations de la foule, à cette minute où l'homme, pour concentrer sur lui toute la fierté des hommes, tout le désir des femmes, n'a qu'à tenir au bout de son épée le masse de bronze au croissant lumineux qui réellement tout à coup piétine, le taureau admirable, aux yeux étonnés. C'était alors le sang, non plus cette eau vitrée d'aujourd'hui, qui descendait en cascades vers la mer." (AF 79-80)

Thus the passionate scarlet of the flamboyants, cascading down to the sea, recalls for Breton the bull's blood shed in the arena and the pride and desire of the spectators. The appeal of the image lies not so much in the fairly conventional parallel between the colour of the blossom and blood but in the verbal elaboration of the metaphor. The lyrical quality is created by the accumulation of the words of the image, by the expansion of a simple basic idea into an intricate, carefully woven verbal structure. The words may have come to Breton in a flash, in the excitement he experiences at the scene before him, but they are no longer the haphazard outpourings of the subconscious mind; they are rather the expression of a very gifted writer, who is able to manipulate adroitly a visual image, whose source may well be in the subconscious mind, and transform it into a highly satisfying verbal image which combines the merits of lucidity with those of blind inspiration. However strongly one believes that Breton has a natural prose-style, one cannot dismiss the conviction that in writings such as L'Amour fou he has worked very



diligently, very intensively, at the prose.

The prior evocation of the flamboyants in the previous paragraph illustrates two other characteristic aspects of Breton's imagery:

"On a dépassé la cime des flamboyants à travers lesquels transparait son aile pourpre et dont les mille rosaces enchevêtrées interdisent de percevoir plus longtemps la différence qui existe entre une feuille, une fleur et une flamme. Ils étaient comme autant d'incendies qui se fussent épris des maisons, contentes d'exister près d'elles sans les étreindre."  
(AF 79)

Firstly, there is the breaking-down of traditional barriers: the inability to distinguish between "une feuille, une fleur et une flamme";<sup>1</sup> secondly, the idea of the non-consuming flames.<sup>2</sup> This phenomenon is explained simply, of course, by the fact that the reference to "flammes" is purely metaphorical, suggested by the colour and the rustling motion of the blossom and the leaves, which gave the trees their name.

Perhaps the finest sequence of images in this chapter follows shortly afterwards:

"Lorsque, lancé dans la spirale du coquillage de l'île, on n'en domine que les trois ou quatre premiers grands enroulements, il semble qu'il se fende en deux de manière à se présenter en coupe une moitié debout, l'autre oscillant en mesure sur l'assiette aveuglante de la mer. Voici, dans le court intervalle de succession des superbes hydres laitières, les dernières maisons groupées au soleil, leurs façades crépies de couleurs inconnues en Europe comme une main de cartes aux dos merveilleusement dépareillés et baignés pourtant de la même lumière, uniformément déteints par le temps depuis lequel le jeu est battu. Le jeu de plusieurs générations de marins. Les blancs navires rêvent dans la rade, Arianes de par toute leur chevelure d'étoiles et leur aisselle de climats. Le paon immense de la mer revient faire la roue à tous les virages. Toute l'ombre relative, tout le cerné des cellules bourdonnantes de jour qui vont toujours se réduisant vers

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1. The lyricism is once more partly created by the alliteration.

2. cf. the example Breton chooses in the first Manifeste to illustrate the image which negates an elementary physical property.

l'intérieur de la crosse, repose sur les plantations de bananiers noirs, aux fleurs d'usine d'où partent les cornes des jeunes taureaux. Toute l'ombre portée sur la mer est faite des grandes étendues de sable plus noir encore qui composent tant de plages comme celle de Puerto Cruz, voilettes interchangeables entre l'eau et la terre, pailletées d'obsidienne sur leur bord par le flot qui se retire." (AF 80-81)

The sequence opens with the description of the shape of the island, seen in the form of a spiral shell. It is an orthodox metaphor, but, of course, an eminently suitable one: not only is the physical, visual description accurate - the outline of Tenerife resembles that of a whelk - but also the association of shells with the sea is as natural as that of the sea and an island. The second image, describing the pebble-dashed fronts of the houses in terms of a hand of cards, is again basically a visual image, which brings out their disposition and their colour, at the same time different and alike, bright and faded, thus fusing opposites and therefore in line with Breton's Surrealist tenets.<sup>1</sup> This image is then extended by the next sentence, where the age of the houses is evoked, but by this stage Breton can omit the tenor in the metaphor and refer solely to the idea of a pack of cards. Having alluded to sailors, Breton's eyes turn to the white ships dreaming in the roads. Their appearance suggests to the poet the image of Ariadne; the reference to the "chevelure d'étoiles" is based presumably on the version of the legend in which Ariadne, having been abandoned on the island of Naxos by Theseus, was discovered by Dionysus, who, enchanted by her beauty, married her when she awoke and gave her as a bridal gift a crown, which was placed among the stars. The image of the dreaming ships is likewise an evocation of the characteristic representation

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1. From the point of view of content, the comparison of the houses with a hand of cards reflects Breton's deep interest in cards.

of Ariadne one finds in wall-paintings, where she is depicted sleeping. The rather curious phrase, "leur aisselle de climats", probably an allusion to the ships' rigging, may have been inspired by the fact that Ariadne became a goddess of vegetation, dormant in winter before awaking in Springtime to a life of renewed luxuriance.<sup>1</sup>

The sea, reaching away to the horizon, is then described as a huge peacock, spreading out its blue-green tail. This splendid image evokes not only the rippling, shimmering colour and beauty of the sea, but also its majesty and pride. Finally, Breton writes of the shadow effect on the sea, created by the famous black beaches, which in turn create in the poet's mind the impression of "voilettes interchangeables entre l'eau et la terre", the flecks of which are formed by the pieces of obsidian washed up by the waves. As a visual image the "voilette" evokes well the rather mysterious volcanic sands.

If the impression created by the previous two or three pages has been that the character of Breton's imagery has suddenly changed completely, this is a little misleading, but the trend it indicates is extremely important. Perhaps a more accurate cross-section of the imagery of L'Amour fou is found a little later:

"La mort, d'où l'horloge à fleurs des campagnes, belle comme ma pierre tombale dressée, se remettra en marche sur la pointe des pieds pour chanter les heures qui ne passent pas. Car une femme et un homme qui, jusqu'à la fin des temps, doivent être toi et moi, glisseront à leur tour sans se retourner jamais jusqu'à perte de sentier, dans la lueur oblique, aux confins de la vie et de l'oubli de la vie, dans l'herbe fine qui court devant nous à l'arborescence. Elle est, cette herbe dentelée, faite des mille liens invisibles, intranchables, qui se sont

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1. A further interesting feature of the imagery of the second half of L'Amour fou is the use Breton makes of classical allusions: mention has been made already of Orpheus and Venus. Classical allusions are very few and far between in the early recueils up to and including Le revolver à cheveux blancs.



trouvés unir ton système nerveux au mien dans la nuit profonde de la connaissance. Ce bateau, gréé de mains d'enfant, épuise la bobine du sort. C'est cette herbe qui continuera après moi à tapisser les murs de la plus humble chambre chaque fois que deux amants s'y enfermeront au mépris de tout ce qui peut advenir, de la précipitation du terme de leur vie même. Il ne sera pas de rocher surplombant, de rocher menaçant à chaque seconde de tomber qui puisse faire qu'autour du lit cette herbe ne s'épaississe au point de dérober à deux regards qui se cherchent et se perdent le reste du monde." (AF 92-95)

This passage opens with a fine example of the "beau comme" type of simile made famous, as far as the Surrealists are concerned, by Lautréamont. The angle of the comparison is fairly narrow ("l'horloge à fleurs/"ma pierre tombale"), because one assumes the presence of flowers on the tombstone. The floral clock is then daintily personified, beginning to advance on tiptoe, and it is thus that the delicate intricacy of its construction is suggested. The phrase "aux confins de la vie et de l'oubli de la vie" is a typical Surrealist fusion of opposites or near-opposites, leading to a "point suprême". It is followed by the dominant motif of this sequence. The image built around this motif, proceeding from the concrete to the abstract and back to the concrete, is based on the resemblance in form between the sensitive plant (a kind of mimosa) and human nerve-fibres, but its purpose is to bring out the force of Breton's conviction that manifold, deep-rooted and unbreakable bonds now unite Jacqueline to him. In a strange development of the image, which conforms to the requirements of convulsive beauty, Breton imagines the plant, representing the bonds of love, on a symbolic tapestry, covering the walls of lovers' bedrooms and shielding the couple from danger, difficulties and the eyes of the world. Enclosed in the ramifications of the image, however, is the much more arbitrary sentence, "Ce bateau gréé de mains d'enfant, épuise la bobine du sort". It is easy, but not sufficient, to dismiss this

as an image lending the mask of the concrete to the abstract. The idea of the rigging which produces the image of the ship, is possibly suggested by its formal, visual resemblance with the nervous system. The complex structure of the rigging, thus evoked, implies the unwinding of vast quantities of rope; the fact that the work is done by a child or children, who often tire of such tasks more quickly than adults do, adds an extra force to the verb "épuiser"; the presence of the allusion to "sort" is explained by the classical conception of Fate, or the Fates, which employs the image of a thread. Breton delays mentioning the name "la sensitive" until the end of the paragraph, and the image is interrupted at this point by a digression on feeling sparked off by the name of the plant, before the evocation of the effect of the slightest touch on the mimosa sets off a fresh series of similes culminating in an extremely delicate and attractive metaphor with multiple resonances:

"Un contact qui n'en a pas même été un pour nous, un contact involontaire avec un seul rameau de la sensitive fait tressaillir en dehors de nous comme en nous tout le pré. Nous n'y sommes pour rien ou si peu et pourtant toute l'herbe se couche. C'est un abattage en règle comme celui d'une boule de neige lancée en plein soleil sur un jeu de quilles de neige. Ou encore un roulement de tambour qui brusquement ne ferait qu'une au monde de compagnies de perdrix. J'ai à peine besoin de te toucher pour que le vif-argent de la sensitive incline sa harpe sur l'horizon."  
(AF 97)

The first comparison with the snowball thrown at the snow skittles is readily comprehensible to even the least imaginative reader, even though it is chiefly the idea of the "abattage" which is illustrated in the image rather than that of a spontaneous and involuntary nervous response. The juxtaposition in the sentence of snow and the sun, however, though perfectly normal, does set the mind thinking in terms of elemental oppositions or fusions. The second comparison, with the effect of a drum-roll on a covey of partridge is perhaps

even more apt, for it brings out more clearly the instantaneous and collective reaction of the birds to the sound.

After these fairly prosaic similes the final sentence of the quotation moves into a different gear, so to speak, without obscuring the sense, for here the lightness of the touch which sets the mimosa in motion is rendered superbly by the allusion to the quicksilver quality and nature of the plant and its subsequent depiction as a harpist plucking and vibrating the strings. In this sequence, therefore, there is a mixture of apparently gratuitous images and more transparent examples. The dominant image belongs to the latter category, however, and this is a true reflection of the imagery of L'Amour fou. The most important images of the book are no longer the arbitrary, surrealist images, but images which, though they may be beautiful, surprising and striking, are nevertheless conventional in one major respect, i.e. that the relationship between their terms is at least reasonably clear.

Chapter V is important, too, for its theoretical remarks on the image. After the mention of the film made by Buñuel and Dali, L'Age d'or, there is a potentially interesting discussion about the frequency of certain phrases in automatic texts:

"Je me suis vivement étonné, à l'époque où nous commençons à pratiquer l'écriture automatique, de la fréquence avec laquelle tendaient à revenir dans nos textes les mots arbre à pain, à beurre, etc. Tout récemment, je me suis demandé s'il ne fallait pas voir dans l'étrange prestige que ces mots exercent sur l'enfant le secret de la découverte technique qui semble avoir mis Raymond Roussel en possession des clés mêmes de l'imagination: 'Je choisissais un mot puis le reliais à un autre par la préposition à! La préposition en question apparaît bien en effet, poétiquement, comme le véhicule de beaucoup le plus rapide et le plus sûr de l'image. J'ajouterai qu'il suffit de relier ainsi n'importe quel substantif à n'importe quel autre, pour qu'un monde de représentations nouvelles surgisse aussitôt." (AF 90)

Unfortunately, Breton does not discuss further here this



technique used by Roussel and, as far as his own images of this type are concerned, we are merely informed that they are to be found frequently in the automatic texts. At this juncture, Breton seems more interested in the subject matter, i.e. that they are food-images, than in the method by which they are produced.<sup>1</sup>

Furthermore, Breton does not mention the fact that Roussel exploited homonyms: Breton's arbre à pain is a much less complex image than Roussel's "palmier à restauration".<sup>2</sup>

A few pages later, Breton returns to the subject of imagery. In the discussion on feeling, provoked by reflections on a sensitive-plant observed in the Jardin de la Orotava in Tenerife, the Surrealists' preoccupation with new images is seen to have received unexpected support from a surprising source, as Breton quotes Juvet,

1. With reference to the period when he began noticing the "phrases de réveil" and began producing automatic texts, Breton has made the interesting observation:

"Knut Hamsun place sous la dépendance de la faim cette sorte de révélation à laquelle j'ai été en proie, et il n'a peut-être pas tort. (Le fait est que je ne mangeais pas tous les jours à cette époque.)" (M32, note 1)

2. Roussel's essay Comment j'ai écrit certains de mes livres had been published in 1935. He explains his technique there in the following way, giving the relevant examples:

"Je choisisais un mot puis le reliais à un autre par la préposition à; et ces deux mots, pris dans un sens autre que le sens primitif, me fournissaient une création nouvelle. (C'est d'ailleurs cette préposition à qui m'avait servi pour ce dont je viens de parler: queue à chiffre, bandes à reprises, blanc à colle). Je dois dire que ce premier travail était difficile et me prenait déjà beaucoup de temps.

Je vais citer des exemples:

Je prenais le mot palmier et décidais de le considérer dans deux sens: le sens de gâteau et le sens d'arbre. Le considérant dans le sens de gâteau, je cherchais à le marier par la préposition à avec un autre mot susceptible lui-même d'être pris dans deux sens différents; j'obtenais ainsi (et c'était là, je le répète, un grand et long travail) un palmier (gâteau) à restauration (restaurant où l'on sert des gâteaux) ce qui me donnait d'autre part un palmier (arbre) à restauration (sens de rétablissement d'une dynastie sur un trône). De là le palmier de la place des Trophées consacré à la restauration de la dynastie des Talou." (op.cit., Paris: Pauvert, 1963, pp.13-14)

who had written in 1933 in La Structure des nouvelles théories physiques:

"C'est dans la surprise créée par une nouvelle image ou par une nouvelle association d'images, qu'il faut voir le plus important élément du progrès des sciences physiques, puisque c'est l'étonnement qui excite la logique, toujours assez froide, et qui l'oblige à établir de nouvelles coordinations...." (AF 96)

Juvet's observation does not shed extra light on the surrealist image as such, and, as far as this study is concerned, of greater interest are the conclusions Breton draws:

"La surprise doit être recherchée pour elle-même, inconditionnellement. Elle n'existe que dans l'intrication en un seul objet du naturel et du surnaturel, que dans l'émotion de tenir et en même temps de sentir s'échapper le ménure-lyre." (AF 97)

Breton is thus still insisting, as Apollinaire had done, on the importance of surprise and indicates one of its sources. The "intrication" in one object of the natural and the supernatural is a further example of the concept of the fusion of opposites, which has become a fundamental aspect of Surrealist dogma.

As La Orotava disappears from view, hidden by a cloud, Breton is reminded first of all of words from the opening poem of Le Spleen de Paris, "J'aime les nuages.....les nuages qui passent.....là-bas .....là-bas.....les merveilleux nuages!" and then suddenly he resumes his discussion of the dialogue between Hamlet and Polonius he had begun in Le Surréalisme et la Peinture (cf. supra, p.139). In L'Amour fou, however, Breton immediately relates the conversation to the famous advice given by Leonardo to his pupils<sup>1</sup> to paint what they saw suggested by the cracks in the wall, advice modified by Max Ernst when he produced his "frottages":

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1. This advice had been mentioned earlier in Le Message automatique, (PJ 166-167)

"Tout le problème du passage de la subjectivité à l'objectivité y est implicitement résolu et la portée de cette résolution dépasse de beaucoup en intérêt humain celle d'une technique, quand cette technique serait celle de l'inspiration même. C'est tout particulièrement dans cette mesure qu'elle a retenu le surréalisme. Le surréalisme n'est pas parti d'elle, il l'a retrouvée en chemin et, avec elle, ses possibilités d'extension à tous les domaines qui ne sont pas celui de la peinture. Les nouvelles associations d'images que c'est le propre du poète, de l'artiste, du savant, de susciter ont ceci de comparable qu'elles empruntent pour se produire un écran d'une texture particulière, que cette texture soit concrètement celle du mur décrépi, du nuage ou de toute autre chose: un son persistant et vague véhicule, à l'exclusion de toute autre, la phrase que nous avons besoin d'entendre chanter. ....L'homme saura se diriger le jour où comme le peintre il acceptera de reproduire sans y rien changer ce qu'un écran approprié peut lui livrer à l'avance de ses actes. Cet écran existe. Toute vie comporte de ces ensembles homogènes de faits d'aspect lézardé, nuageux, que chacun n'a qu'à considérer fixement pour lire dans son propre avenir. Qu'il entre dans le tourbillon, qu'il remonte la trace des événements qui lui ont paru entre tous fuyants et obscurs, de ceux qui l'ont déchiré. Là - si son interrogation en vaut la peine - tous les principes logiques, mis en déroute, se porteront à sa rencontre les puissances du hasard objectif qui se jouent de la vraisemblance. Sur cet écran, tout ce que l'homme veut savoir est écrit en lettres phosphorescentes, en lettres de désir." (AF 99-100)

Thus the consideration of the poetic image is placed in a much larger frame and is linked with the theme of "objective chance". The whole question is then envisaged from the point of view of "la faculté d'interprétation paranoïaque"<sup>1</sup> and this leads to the eventual claim by Breton that imagery of the kind he has always extolled (e.g. the "beau comme" images of Lautréamont) are endowed with a power of persuasion in direct proportion to the initial shock they produce. Before making this claim, however, Breton explains the process:

"Les objets de la réalité n'existent pas seulement en tant que tels: de la considération des lignes qui composent le plus usuel d'entre eux surgit - sans même qu'il soit nécessaire de cligner des yeux - une remarquable image-devinette avec laquelle il fait corps et qui nous entretient, sans erreur possible, du seul objet

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1. The fourth attempt to simulate mental disorders in L'Immaculée Conception had been devoted to paranoia, the Essai de simulation du délire d'interprétation.



réel, actuel, de notre désir. Il va sans dire que ce qui est vrai de l'image graphique complémentaire en question ne l'est pas moins d'une certaine image verbale à quoi la poésie digne de ce nom n'a jamais cessé de faire appel." (AF 101)

The examination of the image is thus related specifically to one of the important themes of L'Amour fou, desire in search of the object of its realization. Breton again finds the very words he requires to express this theme in Baudelaire, this time in Le Voyage:

"Les plus riches cités, les plus grands paysages  
Jamais ne contenaient l'attrait mystérieux  
De ceux que le hasard fait avec les nuages  
Et toujours le désir nous rendait soucieux!"

This idea marks a very important development in Breton's integration of the image into the Surrealist system. Just as the Second Manifeste du Surréalisme and Les Vases communicants had related the automatic image to the state of "surréalité", by the concept of the fusion or the juxtaposition of opposites, so L'Amour fou associates the image with another basic theme of Surrealism, desire in search of the object of its realization. Thus there is a continued linking of the arbitrary image with other fundamental aspects of Surrealist thought; and the continued use of the arbitrary image as a point of reference makes it an important leitmotif in Breton's prose-works in the years leading up to the Second World War.

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Despite their appearance, certain chapters of L'Amour fou, if not the whole book, must be regarded as poetry, albeit perhaps a new kind of poetry. Though their form is that of prose, their content cannot be called prose: the sweeping lyrical surges, the banks of images, the perception by the poet of hitherto unsuspected analogies and their integration into the theme of objective chance, all help to establish that there is poetry in L'Amour fou and even that

L'Amour fou is poetry.

At the thematic level and at the autobiographical level L'Amour fou sees the triumph of desire, the realization of its object; at the level of the imagery the book brings a major development in that the intuitive flashes of the arbitrary images of the earlier texts and poems are now fully worked out and are transformed into rich, complex and many-faceted images, which, though they may perhaps be more traditional and more transparent, are also more satisfying, more complete and yet still original, new and surprising. Breton's imagery reaches a climax in L'Amour fou without submerging the book's important ideas and themes, and this climax will be sustained in the final work of this series, Arcane 17.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### "ARCANE 17" (1944)

The problem of whether these works are poetry or prose, possibly a false problem, as we have seen, preoccupied Michel Beaujour when he was examining Arcane 17 in his article André Breton ou la transparence, but it is resolved in the same way: he has to conclude by regarding it as poetry:

"Arcane 17 est la plus complexe, la plus achevée des proses de Breton. Le livre renonce aux documents photographiques, mais non aux va-et-vient, aux parenthèses, au développement en spirale, au passage insensible du mythique au perçu. Mais comme on progresse dans la lecture, les difficultés s'amenuisent. Sauf celle qui procède de la référence assidue au symbolisme de la dix-septième lame du Tarot. Cependant, pour qui connaît les emblèmes de cette carte, et leur interprétation, le mystère d'Arcane 17 ne se dissipe pas. Il recule. Il était rébus, devinette, il se situe désormais à son juste étiage, celui de la poésie." (A 168)

As one reads Arcane 17, however, one recognizes at once that this is poetry. Breton finds, almost without seeking, the images which are equal to the epic themes: war, exile, death; resurrection, love, freedom. The images eventually reveal to him the significance of events he could previously barely understand, so that the book ends on not just a note of triumph, but a symphony of triumph. Wherever Breton looks, he sees analogies. The images have to be seen in their context to be fully appreciated; they are often so complex, so intricate, that an essential part of their nature would be lost if one attempted to analyse them in isolation; imagery and ideas are so closely interrelated that the separation of one from the other would alter, for the worse, the entire character of the work. Consequently, in order to discuss the imagery of Arcane 17, we have to present and consider its ideas.



The book was written in the late summer and early autumn of 1944 at Sainte-Agathe at the tip of the Gaspé Peninsula in the province of Quebec, near the Rocher Percé and the island of Bonaventure. Breton had travelled there with a Chilean woman, Elisa, whom he had met in New York and who was to become his third wife. She was a divorcee, who had just lost her seventeen-year-old daughter in a drowning accident.

The first half of the book, which serves as a prelude, is inspired by the Rocher Percé and the island of Bonaventure; but though Breton is three thousand miles away from the war in Europe, it is ever in his thoughts; the cliffs become a screen on to which the distant events are projected; they inspire his meditations and bring him constant guidance. We see here how the poet, the man of "more than ordinary sensibility", to use Wordsworth's phrase, employs the vast, natural reservoir of symbols he has to draw on. The idea of "indices", of seemingly cabbalistic signs in the outside world, is suggested by Breton in the very first paragraph, which begins in medias res:

"Dans le rêve d'Elisa, cette vieille gitane qui voulait m'embrasser et que je fuyais, mais c'était l'île Bonaventure, un des plus grands sanctuaires d'oiseaux de mer qui soient au monde. Nous en avons fait le tour le matin même, par temps couvert, sur un bateau de pêche toutes voiles dehors et nous étions plu, au départ, à l'arrangement tout fortuit, mais à la Hogarth des flotteurs faits d'un baril jaune ou rouge, dont le fond s'ornait au pinceau de signes d'apparence cabalistique, baril surmonté d'une haute tige au sommet de laquelle flottait un drapeau noir (le rêve s'est sans doute emparé de ces engins, groupés en faisceaux irréguliers sur le pont, pour vêtir la bohémienne)." (A 5)

Later the island assumes a different form, as Breton mentions a local legend, according to which it was the lair of an ogre who used to abduct and eat all the women and girls of the coast. After his meal the ogre would wash his clothes in the sea and the thought

of the vast quantities of soap-suds, an image suggested by the foam created by the sea as it crashed against the cliffs, prompts Breton to reflect that all the lather of Bonaventure would be needed to wash away the great collective scars and the memories of those times of hatred.

It is generally the Rock of Percé, however, which serves as the basis of the imagery and the screen on which contemporary events are shown for Breton. First of all he tries to portray the physical appearance of the rock. His starting-point is the idea of a symphony, but this does not fully satisfy him, though it does suggest the wedding of the organic and inorganic rhythms of the cliffs: "le repos des oiseaux épouse les anfractuosités de cette muraille à pic." (A 6). For a while Breton is unable to develop this image and his thoughts turn to other matters; then he makes another attempt to evoke the rock; it seems to have two parts; the first suggests a ship on which is superimposed an ancient musical instrument and the second the profile of a bewigged Louis XIV head. Because there are in the cliffs' natural arches, Breton sees a breach in the ship's prow; this breach then suggests the image of an organ, and the face is at last identified as that of Bach. This first complex image, undergoing continual metamorphosis until it is finally and satisfactorily worked out, illustrates immediately how Breton operates in the first half of the book and how the Rocher Percé inspires the various analogies.

Between the first mention of a symphony and the eventual image of Bach, the thought of Louis XIV had led Breton to discuss the resemblance between the condition of France at the end of the Sun King's long reign and the country's contemporary situation. In

a storm Breton glimpses for one fleeting moment depicted on the cliffs the bleeding heart of sombre Europe. After the storm abates, the sunlight picks out the different colours of the strata; pink, purple, periwinkle blue and ultramarine. For Breton they seem to represent the different stages of man's cultural development, and in them he sees a ray of hope. For him all the envisageable future of man is based on the complex and indivisible substratum suggested by the Rock of Percé: the fifteenth century of Venice and Sienna, the sixteenth century of Elizabethan England, the second half of the eighteenth century in France, the beginning of the nineteenth century in Germany, one aspect of the twentieth century in Russia. Like the great rock before Breton's eyes civilisation is one, whatever one might think of the war. Breton is able to separate man's basic condition from his contemporary social condition. After quoting a description of the misery of Paris and the sordid Court intrigues at the end of the reign of Louis XIV, Breton is consoled by the knowledge that against that dark background he could set the star of Watteau. The poet's splendid evocation of the universe of Watteau makes us deduce Breton's optimism as far as the war in Europe is concerned:

"Touche-t-il à l'appareil guerrier d'alors: ces tricornes, ces buffleteries, cas basques, il ne chante que ce qui rutille aux yeux des filles et les dispose à faire valoir la souplesse de leur taille, le bond de leur gorge. Il nous tient loin des affres de la bataille: la lutte n'admet pour proportions que celles du tournoi galant de toujours, encore les belles ne résistent-elles pas." (A 21-23)

Breton is filled with wonder and pleasure at the knowledge that Watteau, despite his hardships and his failing health, was still able to compose his great anthem to the glory of nature and love. Thus Breton realizes with the aid of a new image that when the storm



is past, it is forgotten when the fisher discovers the pearl.

Life begins anew; and with images of light and leaves (the emblems of Spring rather than the Fall) Breton now writes of the entry into his life of Elisa:

"Avant de te connaître j'avais rencontré le malheur, le désespoir. Avant de te connaître, allons donc, ces mots n'ont pas de sens. Tu sais bien qu'en te voyant la première fois, c'est sans la moindre hésitation que je t'ai reconnue."  
(A 23)

Breton refers to the loss of Elisa's daughter, without mentioning the loss of his own daughter, Aube, if only for a few years, after his separation from Jacqueline, who had become the mistress of his friend, the sculptor, David Hare.

When Breton first saw Elisa, he could sense in her eyes the signs of her tragedy, eyes which had stared at the countenance of death, eyes surrounded by a blue shadow, like the shadow in the rushes at break of day. Simile has become as important as metaphor, but, of course, even this comparison brings together "distant realities", the eyes and the rushes, though Breton makes a clear and explicit link between them. Like Breton she needs to live again, and to live life to the full:

"Puisque la vie a voulu de toi contre toi-même, tu n'es pas celle qui peut ne se donner à elle qu'à demi. La douleur et le rêve même d'y succomber n'auront été pour toi que des portes, ouvertes sur le besoin toujours renaissant de fléchir, de sensibiliser, d'embellir cette vie cruelle." (A 24-25)

The epic backcloth of the war is thus the macrocosm of the private tragedies and darkness Breton and Elisa have endured. The worst is over, however; like the Phoenix, Europe and France are about to emerge from the flames, and in similar but more private fairy-story images of resurrection Breton evokes the fresh start he and Elisa are about to make at the same time:

"Il n'y fallut rien moins que l'assistance de toutes les puissances qui se manifestent dans les contes pour que de la cendre surgisse la fleur-qui-embaume, bondisse la bête blanche dont le long oeil dévoile les mystères des bois." (A 25)

Similarly during the course of the war Breton had perceived signs of a resurgence of poetry, though not in the "poésie de circonstance" of the Resistance poets - Breton had, as we have seen, discovered Aimé Césaire - and this increases his optimism. Though Breton comes back later to the theme of poetry, when he claims that poetry alone can explore new domains and reveals that he felt he must re-discover his own poetic understanding of the universe at that stage of his life, and for this he needed Elisa's love, the remainder of the first part of Arcane 17 is dominated by the theme of love Breton had just re-discovered.

In the lyrical passage beginning "Grandes orgues de l'amour humain...."(A 26), in which the imagery of man and nature, the sea and the city, the midnight sun and castles of ice evokes the idea of fusion, Breton sings the praises of the mutual love of a man and a woman, and claims:

"Toutes idées fallacieuses, insoutenables de rédemption mises à part, c'est précisément par lui seul que se réalise au plus haut degré la fusion de l'existence et de l'essence, c'est lui seul qui parvient à concilier d'emblée, en pleine harmonie et sans équivoque, ces deux notions, alors qu'elles demeurent hors de lui toujours inquiètes et hostiles." (A 26)

The Rimbaldian slogans, "Trouver le lieu et la formule" and "posséder la vérité dans une âme et un corps" lead Breton to speak in terms of the myth of Androgyne:

".....cette aspiration suprême suffit à dérouler devant elle le champ allégorique qui veut que tout être humain ait été jeté dans la vie à la recherche d'un être de l'autre sexe et d'un seul qui lui soit sous tous les rapports apparié, au point que l'un sans l'autre apparaisse comme le produit de dissociation d'un seul bloc de lumière. Ce bloc, heureux entre tous ceux qui parviennent à le reconstituer." (A 27)

Breton knows that physical attraction by itself does not suffice, though he recognizes that when one is in the jungle of loneliness one glance, one coy wave of a fan can make a man think of paradise. On the other hand, he is convinced that a conception of love the same as his own is found in the letters of Héloïse, in the theatre of Shakespeare and Ford, in the letters of The Portuguese Nun (Mariana Alcoforado), in the works of Novalis and in Jude the Obscure. After stating the obvious, that in the most general sense love depends on reciprocity, Breton brings together again the two ideas to create the concept of love which has become his credo:

"Mais l'amour réciproque est le seul qui conditionne l'aimantation totale, sur quoi rien ne peut avoir prise, qui fait que la chair est soleil et empreinte splendide à la chair, que l'esprit est source à jamais jaillissante, inaltérable et toujours vive dont l'eau s'oriente une fois pour toutes entre le souci et le serpolet." (A 28)

Breton pauses to evoke the beauty of Elisa, made more classical, more "eternal" by being tempered by tragedy; he sees in her face the beauty of Helen of Troy, which to him seems to heighten the beauty of the new day dawning and the rock face of Percé, lending them her own grandeur; and it is on this note that Breton completes his creed of love:

"Le haut de la montagne ne prend vraiment forme divine que dans la brume de ton regard, que par l'aile de l'aigle doré passant sur tes cheveux. Et je t'aime parce que l'air de la mer et celui de la montagne, confondus ici dans leur pureté originelle, ne sont pas plus exempts de miasmes et plus enivrants que celui de ton âme où la plus grande rafale a passé, la confirmant solennellement et en toute rigueur dans sa disposition naturelle à tout résoudre, et, pour commencer, les menues difficultés de la vie, par l'effusion d'une générosité sans limites qui témoignerait à elle seule de ce que tu possèdes en propre: le sens absolu de la grandeur." (A 30-31)

Breton feels that thanks to love, poetry and art a new confidence in the future is being reborn: and so, just before the end of the first



part of the book Breton repeats his belief in the power of love and stresses the role love must play, at that critical moment in man's history:

"..... la grande malédiction est levée, c'est dans l'amour humain que réside toute la puissance de régénération du monde." (A 54)

For Breton love has come on to the scene like a fairy god-mother. He twists the myth of the fall of Babylon, symbolized by the angel casting into the sea a great millstone, by pointing out that there is another stone the prophecy failed to mention, the rock of love, the love of a man and a woman, held back for so long by lies, hypocrisy and psychological misery, the love which took its halting first steps to triumph in the song of the Provençal troubadours. This thought leads Breton to see in the cliffs of Percé the buttresses of the castles of Aquitaine and in the background Montségur, still burning, before the images change again, giving way to Juliet's window and the room where Kleist spent his last night on earth. Throughout this first part of the book the Rocher Percé acts as the fixed term in a whole series of metaphors and comparisons, in which this physical feature of the New World reminds Breton of Europe and Europeans. For over fifty pages Breton explores this fundamental analogy, subjecting it to constant modification and revealing the state of flux in which he saw the world at that crucial moment in history.

Breton hoped that when the war in Europe and Asia eventually came to an end, it would not be merely a military victory, but also the triumph of love and the beginning of a new and better world. Therefore he begins in Arcane 17 to consider what changes needed to be brought about. This theme of change is perhaps inspired by the

changing images perceived by Breton in the rock. In a few pages he surveys the state of man's knowledge and makes important proposals for reform, the reform of education as of society. In those pages one finds the essence of his philosophy.

He is convinced that man's great enemy is what he calls opaqueness. Breton is scathing about man's relative ignorance, his readiness to accept blindly and unquestioningly a series of ready-made ideas, from which it is difficult to break free. He believes that many of our ideas are no more than simple assumptions, he pours scorn on our pride which has made us feel that man is the lord of creation; he attacks the educational system because of the way it lays down as truths what are in fact merely hypotheses or appearances, if not downright lies, and to support his point he mentions certain history books; he condemns the whole concept of national history which he would replace by a universal history of man, compiled by men of all races and nations; he feels that our ideas are channelled in certain directions from the moment of birth, by the Church, school, the Army, the factory, and so forth; he criticizes the glorification of certain figures whom he feels are not worthy of such acclaim, and the example he chooses is La Fontaine, "qui continue, sans le moindre titre, à passer pour un poète et à jouir, en France, de la stupéfiante prérogative d'être le premier éducateur de la jeunesse" (A 38). Breton deplores the fact that certain "grands aventuriers de l'esprit" (Paracelsus, Rousseau, Sade, Lautréamont, Freud, Marat and Saint-Just, to name but a few) have never received anything like such acclaim, and furthermore he would like to see brought back into favour the social reformers of the early nineteenth century, mentioning by name Fourier, Flora Tristan,

Father Enfantin.

So Breton wanted the end of the war to see the diffusion and promulgation of new radical ideas, and mentions for the first time near the end of this prelude the idea of "le salut terrestre par la femme", alluding discreetly to the final lines of Faust II. The first part of the book closes, however, with a further evocation of the Rocher Percé, which Breton considers to be an ideal point from which to observe contemporary events. In the twilight and in the early morning mists its form is subjected to continual metamorphosis. It takes on the appearance of a medieval ship, whose captain is also a magician, a ship which only a short time before seemed stripped of its rigging, but which now seems set for a long voyage of adventure. Perhaps Breton regards the ship as a sign that he, too, will soon be sailing home and like the Argonauts of old will continue his life's quest. The life-span and size of the rock<sup>1</sup> place Paris in perspective, though the thought of Paris now enables Breton to see in the cliffs the great rose-window of Notre-Dame, a clear reminder here of the force of destiny, before it fades from view to be replaced by a theatre, whose curtain rises on a children's fairy story; the hoary frost, an old witch, keeps locked indoors the little girl who looks after the owl, but the bird has won the confidence of the child by telling her of the Northern Lights and by giving her the secret of a shining magic eye which enables the girl to see amazing sights and to create light. In this embryonic myth the ideas of insight and revelation are, of course, very much in evidence once

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1. Breton points out that experts had assessed its weight as 4 million tons, and because it is being continually eroded had calculated that it would disappear in 13,000 years.



more. Likewise in the quartz seams of the cliffs, in the "image maintenant transparente du rocher", Breton sees a thousand heralds, the embodiments of signs and portents, bearing banners, before he makes his final description of the rock, which links the image of the ship, the ark, with the book's great themes, i.e. fusing the concrete and the abstract:

"Enchâssée dans son merveilleux iceberg de pierre de lune, elle est mue par trois hélices de verre qui sont l'amour, mais tel qu'entre deux êtres il s'élève à l'invulnérable, l'art mais seulement l'art parvenu à ses plus hautes instances et la lutte à outrance pour la liberté. A l'observer plus distraitemment du rivage le Rocher Percé n'est ailé que de ses oiseaux." (A 56-57)

The connections between the glass propellers on the one hand, and love, art and the struggle for freedom on the other exist only in Breton's imagination, but the image of the "hélices" represents the powerful driving-forces that Breton hopes the three abstract terms will become in the post-war era; but significantly, Breton's ark is still enshrined, mounted, or even held fast in the ice.

Thus in the first part of the book, the imagery is in a constant state of metamorphosis, now inspired by the sight of the cliffs, now inspired by Breton's reflections on contemporary events or on the situation in which he and Elisa find themselves. The themes suggest images and the images in their turn lead to new themes.

The second part of the book begins with a recollection of the legend of Mélusine, which Breton exploits to develop his theme of "le salut terrestre par la femme". Breton had mentioned the name of Mélusine in Nadja to evoke Nadja's hair-style, and Nadja's mysterious nature as well as her misfortunes foster the comparison, but in Arcane 17 Mélusine becomes the symbol of Woman. According to the

legend Mélusine had received from her mother, the fairy Présine, the gift, or curse, of being transformed every Saturday into an "ondine"; the lower half of her body became that of a water-serpent. If she married a human being who could abstain from seeing her on Saturdays, she would bring him happiness and would help him to build a great empire. She married Count Raymondin and built for him the castle of Lusignan; he became a powerful lord, but one Saturday he surprised Mélusine in her bath, at which she escaped through the window, uttering a terrible cry. Though she thus lost her human form, nevertheless she continued throughout the centuries to watch over the House of Lusignan; and legend had it that each time misfortune or disaster befell that House, Mélusine's cry could be heard anew.

For Breton, the House of Lusignan seems to represent France and he reveals that in both World Wars he had expected to hear the cry.

Though Anna Balakian identifies her more with Breton and Elisa than with Woman, Mélusine appears to be used more by Breton as a symbol of Woman, of Woman's plight. In wartime, after all, women were the great victims of the military enterprises; like Mélusine, women were the eternal innocent losers; but Breton feels this role must be changed:

"Oui, c'est toujours la femme perdue, celle qui chante dans l'imagination de l'homme mais au bout de quelles épreuves pour elle, pour lui, ce doit être aussi la femme retrouvée. Et tout d'abord il faut que la femme se retrouve elle-même, qu'elle apprenne à se reconnaître à travers ces enfers auxquels la voue sans son secours plus que problématique la vue que l'homme, en général, porte sur elle....." (A 60)

Breton recalls the sight at the Gare de l'Est of the outstretched arms of women, the symbols of the lovers' embrace, but which there seemed more the gestures of tragedy. Breton knows that war

is the enemy of women, but was surprised that women had not exercised their influence as lovers and mothers to stop their menfolk fighting, by simply saying "vous êtes des frères".

Breton's solution to the contemporary crisis was to claim that the time had come to replace "male" ideas by those of women: he was convinced that the duty of the artist at that time was to bring about the predominance of the "système féminin du monde" over the masculine order, to exalt the special faculties of Woman.

Then Breton pauses to evoke Mélusine after her cry. The sight of a lake makes Breton think, after perceiving its analogy with a ring, an analogy based on its quality of scintillation and possibly on its shape, of the sposalizio del mare (an annual ceremony in Venice during which the Doge "married", or took possession of the sea by throwing into the water a ring blessed by the patriarch); and then the thought of Mélusine's scales, the impediments to her freedom and happiness, makes Breton realize that her unfortunate condition is exactly the same as that of modern women:

"C'est la femme toute entière et pourtant la femme telle qu'elle est aujourd'hui, la femme privée de son assiette humaine, prisonnière de ses racines mouvantes tant qu'on veut, mais aussi par elles en communication providentielle avec les forces élémentaires de la nature. La femme privée de son assiette humaine, la légende la veut ainsi, par l'impatience et la jalousie de l'homme." (A 65)

Yet Breton knows that Mélusine in herself had not really changed, despite the metamorphosis. Women, despite their shackles, still had their special talents and capacities.

It is at this point that Breton creates a new myth, as he imagines the second cry of Mélusine:

"..... le second cri de Mélusine, ce doit être la descente d'escarpolette dans un jardin où il n'y a pas d'escarpolette, ce doit être l'ébat des jeunes caribous dans la clairière, ce doit être le rêve de l'enfantement sans la douleur." (A 66)



In these splendid images Breton evokes what he believes ought to be the nature of woman's world; the allusions to the swing suggest a perpetual and universal "fête galante", the frolics of the caribou carefree and idyllic pleasures; and the final dream symbolizes the end of all suffering, not just women's private pain. In a superb passage Breton portrays Mélusine at the moment of uttering her second cry, changed back into a whole woman, liberated from her chains, free at last to develop completely:

".....elle a jailli de ses hanches sans globe, son ventre est toute la moisson d'août, son torse s'élance en feu d'artifice de sa taille cambrée, moulée sur deux ailes d'hirondelle, ses seins sont des hermines prises dans leur propre cri, aveuglantes à force de s'éclairer du charbon ardent de leur bouche hurlante. Et ses bras sont l'âme des ruisseaux qui chantent et parfument." (A 66)

The image of the harvest is not merely a symbol of fertility, but of peace, warmth, satisfaction and the full development of potential, just as the image of the bust evokes the total expansion of her personality. Michel Beaujour explains that stoats are emblematic of the beloved's breasts because they evoke fur coats (A 181); but Breton's image is more complex than Beaujour indicates, since Mélusine's cry is now a cry of liberation, unlike the stoat's squeal. The evocation of Mélusine's arms not only is based on the traditional concept of water as the feminine element, but also serves to accentuate the impression of her sensual attraction and her newfound gaiety. These individual analogies are overwhelmed, however, by the total fusion of Mélusine's whole being with the natural world. She becomes almost an abstraction and portrayed in what Breton regards as her most perfect form, that of the "femme-enfant", she represents the eternal quality of the beauty of woman:

"Et sous l'écroulement de ses cheveux dédorés se composent à jamais tous les traits distinctifs de la femme-enfant, de cette variété si particulière qui a toujours subjugué les poètes parce que le temps sur elle n'a pas de prise." (A 66)

In an important statement Breton proclaims that art must systematically prepare the triumph of the "femme-enfant": Breton himself portrays her in turn as Balkis, as Cleopatra on the morning of Actium, as Bettina, as Michelet's young sorceress and as Gustave Moreau's "fée au griffon", a list which seems to bring together the two elements of the phrase, the "femme-fée", rather than the concept of the "femme-enfant". Furthermore, Breton argues that male psychology is in no way valid for women, before revealing why he has taken the "femme-enfant" for his ideal:

"Je choisis la femme-enfant non pour l'opposer à l'autre femme, mais parce qu'en elle me semble résider à l'état de transparence absolue l'autre prisme de vision dont on refuse obstinément de tenir compte, parce qu'il obéit à des lois différentes dont le despotisme masculin doit empêcher à tout prix la divulgation." (A 69)

Thus according to Breton, the "femme-enfant" brings out best the particular gifts and capacities of women he wants to see emerge. At this point in the narrative the vision of the "new woman" gradually clouds, and after a last dig at men, politicians at a conference, "ces messieurs de l'enterrement", Breton looks out of the window at the night and recalls the virgin night evoked by Novalis. The Rocher Percé has faded from his view. Breton is struck by the immensity of the night and by its magic quality, but in these ideal conditions for the perception of analogies, the night gives up its secrets. As Breton's eyes adjust to the darkness, he makes out seven flowers which become seven stars, in the centre of which is the most brilliant, Sirius, seen as Lucifer and the Morning Star. Their light reveals a naked girl kneeling by the side of a pool, into which she pours with

her right hand the contents of a golden urn whilst with her left hand she empties the contents of a vessel of silver. On either side of her are an acacia-tree and a butterfly balancing on a flower. The view from the window has thus been transformed in Breton's mind into the Tarot card, the seventeenth arcanum, the Star, which, according to a contemporary occultist, Papus, symbolizes hope, the influence of heaven, eloquence and life.<sup>1</sup> The significance of the title-image of the Tarot card dominates the remainder of the book; the identification between the night sky and the Tarot card, and the interpretation of the latter in terms of the contemporary situation, show how Breton reacts to such analogies and to what he sees as indices. The Tarot card has thus taken over the functions of the Rocher Percé in the image-forming process. The girl depicted on the card suggests to Breton not just Mélusine, not just Eve, but Woman in general.

Breton knows that, because of Elisa's entry into his life, it is within himself that the window of the night has opened; she has brought him revelation. He speaks of his belief in "secours extraordinaires" of this order, especially in times of deep moral crisis, in grief as in boredom. He had discovered in the past that the experience of the depths of boredom sometimes led to strange but right solutions. He thinks back on how he felt when he first met Elisa; a large part of his world was in ruins; his daughter had been taken away from him, he was separated from many of his friends, he was exiled in a land whose language he did not speak. This language-barrier and the skyscrapers made New York take on in Breton's eyes

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1. v. Bessy, M., History of Magic and the Supernatural, p.55.



the form of a Tower of Babel. Furthermore, even words he once thought he understood, words such as right, justice and freedom, had been debased in the previous few years. He thinks of the debate provoked by the publication of Le Silence de la mer and wonders what Paris was really like in that summer of 1944. He knows that it could not be the same as it was in the Spring of 1940 before the fall of France. He felt it was absolutely essential that Paris should have liberated herself. Though France was historically the country of freedom, Breton felt it could not afford to rest on its laurels and that people must speak out so that France does not forfeit her mission.

The night becomes an allegory. Through the window - or from the Tarot card - Breton hears from the two urns the voices of the streams. The left-hand stream, the stream of fire (the animus or masculine spirit), speaks first: in its smoke can be perceived the towns of the future, and it claims that in the pool are buried ideas which have ceased to inspire men; it is the pool of obsolete dogmas. The Sartrian notion of "viscosity" is present in the image of the "magma", with its suggestion of bad faith, but in the last few words of this speech there is nonetheless some ray of hope for the future, if "male" ideas can be revitalized, if new ideas can be disseminated:

"Il (cet étang) est celui des innombrables existences renfermées sur elles-mêmes, dont le magma dégage, à certaines heures, une odeur pestilentielle mais qui n'en reste pas moins en puissance de resplendir d'un nouveau rêve, car c'est à lui que j'apporte le bouillonnement incessant des idées dissidentes, des idées-ferments et c'est par moi qu'il retrouve dans ces profondeurs le principe secret de ses tourbillons." (A 86-87)

Then the right-hand stream speaks: it is the voice of water (the anima, the feminine spirit, or spiritual wealth). With the aid of images of the germination and growth of plants, it expresses the

ideas of fecundity and of refreshing, revitalizing forces. Breton is not slow to point out, however, that "feminine" ideas would also cease to be fruitful the moment that man does not water them in an open-minded manner with clarity, mobility and generosity; but by and large the "anima" speaks of springtime, youth and hope, "l'éternel reverdissement de ses raisons d'espérer". Like Ariadne, the "anima" is the emblem of annual rebirth.

The themes of rebirth, resurrection and regeneration, presented by images of Siamese fighting-fish, a rose, the butterfly and the myth of Osiris, dominate the next section of the book.

The ornamental fighting-fish evoke, of course, men in times of war, but Breton knows that at the end of the fight there is peace and a new dawn.

The rose, the symbol of achievement of the self and the blossoming of the personality in most traditions of magic as in dreams, suggests to Breton the collar of the sacred ibis (the symbol of Thoth) and points out to him that the aptitude for regeneration is boundless and that winter is a transitory season.

The butterfly, the emblem of metamorphosis, reminds Breton of the mystery of successive generations, and the image of its wing seems to him to represent in all languages the first letter of the word "resurrection". The constantly changing nature of the insect's form is a sign to Breton of the cycles of the changing seasons and of death and rebirth.

Before evoking the myth of Osiris Breton relates these ideas and themes to Elisa's own experience and reveals to her their simple truths. He recalls his first sight of her and what she meant for him then:

"Ce fut là pour moi la clé même de cette révélation dont j'ai parlé et que je ne pouvais devoir qu'à toi seule au seuil de ce dernier hiver. Dans la rue glacée je te revois moulée sur un frisson, les yeux seuls à découvert. Le col haut relevé, l'écharpe serrée de la main sur la bouche, tu étais l'image même du secret, d'un des grands secrets de la nature au moment où il se livre et dans tes yeux de fin d'orage on pouvait voir se lever un très pâle arc-en-ciel." (A 93)

The image of the rainbow once again is the symbol of the end of the storm, of a fresh beginning, and perpetual reminders of the rainbow are seen by Breton in Elisa's eyes. For Breton, Elisa, though she herself was no longer young, has come to embody eternal youth and he has merely to look at her to know that this concept is not a mere myth. Like the rainbow for Noah, she has become its seal, but Breton identifies it with the shining star he interprets as the star of hope reborn.

In a dream inspired by the star and the Tarot card Breton is transported to Ancient Egypt. Visions of crocodiles, pyramids, hieroglyphs and scorpions set the scene, and then the myth is enacted: the image of a sparrow-hawk, like the ibis a sacred bird, pecking out its own heart, which is replaced by a young heart of light, represents and prefigures the dismembering of Osiris. The girl on the Tarot card is now identified with Isis, condemned in her beauty to reassemble the mutilated body of her brother-god. In his narration of the dream Breton catches the spirit of esoteric formulae:

"Tremblant, je suis témoin de l'artifice sublime en quoi trouve le moyen de s'exécuter la loi énigmatique, imprescriptible: ce qui a été démonté en quatorze pièces doit être remonté quatorze fois." (A 101)

The strangeness and vividness of this dream prompts Breton to claim that ancient myths seem so much richer and more ambitious than the Christian myth, and to support his arguments he refers to the



ceremonies and rituals of the Hopi Indians. He attacks what he regards as a tendency to over-simplification in the interpretation of myths and observes that it is important that myths should have several meanings and interpretations.

Breton then explains the special merit of esoteric thought:

"L'ésotérisme, toutes réserves faites sur son principe même, offre au moins l'immense intérêt de maintenir à l'état dynamique le système de comparaison, de champ illimité, dont dispose l'homme, qui lui livre les rapports susceptibles de relier les objets en apparence les plus éloignés et lui découvre partiellement la mécanique du symbolisme universel."  
(A 105)

Breton knows that this had been understood admirably by the great poets of the previous hundred years: Hugo, Nerval, Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Apollinaire. Breton claims that, whatever certain people may suggest to the contrary, the contact to which he refers has always been maintained and will always be maintained. He believes that the process of artistic discovery is bound up with the processes of magic, whether the artist is conscious of this or not.

What Breton therefore singles out for particular attention in esoteric thought is the very point which is of the greatest relevance for the study of his imagery and his theory of the image: its unlimited system of comparison. This basic criterion for the surrealist image, expressed in the Manifeste du Surréalisme, is thus now dressed up in the cloak of esoteric terminology or, quite simply, related to occultist thought.

Breton then recounts the description by Eliphas Lévi of the final stage of initiation into the mysteries of Eleusis, when a veiled high priest shouted into the ear of the initiate: "Osiris est un dieu noir". Breton confides that each time he felt that Elisa was depressed and about to abandon hope, he would cheer her by

whispering those words into her ear, to remind her of the myth of death and rebirth the Egyptian god incarnates. Breton tells Elisa and the reader that from the experience of deep suffering man can derive important lessons and benefits:

"Il faut être allé au fond de la douleur humaine, en avoir découvert les étranges capacités, pour pouvoir saluer du même don sans limites de soi-même ce qui vaut la peine de vivre."  
(A 107)

Breton condemns what he calls the lamentable efforts of the priests who had tried to bring Elisa consolation in her grief and observes that suffering was only a disgrace if it led to resignation. Instead of resignation Breton feels that suffering should foment rebellion, and he employs to evoke revolt the image of a spark in the wind seeking the powder-horn.

With this mention of revolt Breton comes to the final part of the book where he examines the respective merits of liberation and freedom. The thought of the need to fight and resist suffering and misfortune leads him to think of the Resistance movement in France, but Breton fears that the spirit of resistance will die once the war is over. He remembers that he had often felt between the wars that the concept of freedom was in danger of being forgotten and lost even in France, and he hopes that the people will take to heart the lessons of the previous decade. Breton believes that freedom should be conceived of not as a state but as a living and vital force. He warns that the struggle for the liberation of France only partly coincided with the fight for freedom. To Breton's mind, liberation is a negative idea, whereas freedom is


"..... une idée pleinement maîtresse d'elle-même, qui reflète une vue inconditionnelle de ce qui qualifie l'homme et prête seul un sens appréciable au devenir humain..... La liberté, elle, échappe à toute contingence. La liberté, non seulement comme idéal mais comme créateur constant

d'énergie, telle qu'elle a existé chez certains hommes et peut être donné pour modèle à tous les hommes, doit exclure toute idée d'équilibre confortable et se concevoir comme éréthisme continu." (A 116-117)

Whereas Breton sees liberation as a fight against illness, freedom is health. Liberation may suggest a restoration of health but it may be merely the remission of the fever.

The image of the star is then brought back, for into it is transformed the spark of freedom. The star has become the Morning Star and it at last explains the secret of its structure, why it has twice as many branches as the other stars in the sky, why these branches are red and yellow, as if two stars had joined together:

"Elle est faite de l'unité même de ces deux mystères: l'amour appelé à renaître de la perte de l'objet de l'amour et ne s'élevant qu'alors à sa pleine conscience, à sa totale dignité; la liberté vouée à ne se bien connaître et à ne s'exalter qu'au prix de sa privation même." (A 118-119)

The double contradiction is resolved with the protection of the tree (which contains the debris of dead wisdom and knowledge) by means of the exchanges maintained by the butterfly and the flower, bringing the certainty of eternal renewal. The instrument is the Hebrew hieroglyph, the letter , which resembles the tongue in the mouth and which signifies speech itself.

Breton feels that the allegorical truth he has so far revealed needs to be completed by a chance myth. Information had seemed to be lacking concerning the appearance of the major star, but the missing symbol was suddenly brought to light by the publication of Auguste Viatte's study Victor Hugo et les Illuminés de son temps,<sup>1</sup> which revealed the parallel between the book by the Abbé Constant (alias Eliphas Lévi), Le Testament de la Liberté, and La Fin de Satan.

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1. Montréal: Edns de l'Arbre, 1943.



Both works allude to the angel's fall, but there is also mention of the legend that Lucifer sired two daughters, Poetry and Liberty, and that the spirit of love will borrow their features to subdue and save the rebellious fallen angel.

To complete the picture and to close the pages of his book Breton cites and interprets Hugo's vision of the creation of the Angel Liberty:

"L'ange Liberté, née d'une plume blanche échappée à Lucifer durant sa chute, pénètre dans les ténèbres; l'étoile qu'elle porte à son front grandit, devient 'météore d'abord, puis comète et fournaise'. On voit comme, en ce qu'elle pouvait encore avoir d'incertain, l'image se précise: c'est la révolte même, la révolte seule qui est créatrice de lumière. Et cette lumière ne peut se connaître que trois voies: la poésie, la liberté et l'amour qui doivent inspirer le même zèle et converger, à en faire la coupe même de la jeunesse éternelle, sur le point moins découvert et le plus illuminable du coeur humain."  
(A 121)

Thus the star on the Tarot card, the traditional emblem of hope, acquires extra meanings in Arcane 17; practising what he had preached, Breton makes the myth multi-dimensional; at the end of the book the star of light at one and the same time is the star of revolt, of poetry, of freedom and of love. Like the Rock of Percé in the morning mist and in the half-light of evening, the images it suggests are in constant flux; their light reveals the manifold facets of the book's great themes: death and rebirth, war and peace, sorrow and love. Images and ideas are woven skilfully into a tapestry of epic dimensions, but unlike the tapestry of Penelope, one in which the threads are at last all joined. The Rock of Percé brings together two epochs of despair and misery for France; the end of the reign of Louis XIV and the Second World War; the Tarot card gives hope and the will to fight on to Breton and Elisa in their private hours of darkness and brings the promise of peace.

Anna Balakian feels that Breton, when he wrote Arcane 17, must have considered it as the Great Book, the synthesis of all that went before,

".....as the Work in the alchemic sense of the word, the summit and supreme point of all that preceded, as close to the top of the mountain as he could expect to come, and that everything after would be anticlimatic." <sup>1</sup>

There is some validity in this claim, provided that one accepts that the allusion to the Great Work is purely figurative, despite Breton's use of occultist motifs and his references to hermeticism. Arcane 17 is the last work of the series of "proses", though not, as Anna Balakian suggests, his last work except for the Ode à Charles Fourier and a few fragmental verses, for, as will be demonstrated, Constellations, written almost a decade and a half later, is an important and fine recueil.

Arcane 17, at the levels both of themes and of imagery, brings an extra dimension to Breton's writings. The purely personal vision which is the basic universe of Breton's earlier poetry is now placed in the perspective of contemporary events of the gravest significance: the spectacle of Breton salvaging his own life from the ruins of exile and separation from a wife and daughter, and of Elisa struggling to emerge from the shadow of death occupies merely the apron-stage where the poet seeks and finds keys to an understanding of the epic and tragic events on the world's stage before him.

Arcane 17 is the last book of the quartet in every sense: it evokes Breton's final discovery of love and the final intervention of objective chance, and in the field of imagery it marks the high point for the new style of image which has emerged in these prose-works, a style of image which develops what the imagery of L'Air de

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1. Balakian, A., André Breton, p.201.

l'Eau and Constellations expresses more fleetingly. In the images in the prose-works Breton can work out fully what he generally leaves as sudden flashes of intuition and inspiration in his poems.

The list of surrealist images in the first Manifeste bears little relation to the nature of the image in this important part of Breton's poetry. In Nadja and Les Vases communicants the imagery is relatively unimportant, but in the second half of L'Amour fou it begins to play the role it assumes in Arcane 17 where it blends admirably with the themes and ideas, where there is a constant interchange of image and idea. In Arcane 17 the imagery goes far beyond the levels of metaphor and simile, far beyond the categories of "surrealist images" listed by Breton in 1924; it belongs for the most part to the mysterious realms of symbolism and myth; at times it unfolds into allegory; it is expressed in literary and biblical allusions; it translates into words both Breton's intuitions of strange but profound analogies between his private situation and the Cosmos and also the latter's manifold and multiform messages which the poet succeeds in decoding.

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Many of the themes and preoccupations of Breton revealed in these four works will be encountered again in the poems proper, to be discussed now in Part III, but in the "prose quartet" they are presented in a much more explicit fashion; but just as Breton was able to decipher the signs and indices far better in Arcane 17 than in Nadja, so there is a similar progression from what is often the mere registering of images in Breton's early surrealist recueils to a more subtle presentation of symbols and perception of



analogies in later collections and in the long poems.

After the more theoretical discussion of imagery in Part I and the "mélange" of theory, autobiography and poetry in the chapters on the "prose quartet", we can now turn to the poems proper, to study in detail Breton's evolution as a poet, particularly in his use of imagery.

PART THREE

THE IMAGERY IN BRETON'S POEMS

## INTRODUCTION

Breton's recueils and his four long poems (Pleine marge, Fata Morgana, Les Etats généraux and the Ode à Charles Fourier) will be considered in more or less chronological order, though the long poems will be taken as a series. Throughout this final part of the thesis Breton's poems will be studied with reference to aspects of his poetic theory. In the opening chapter, at least, the nature of certain of the influences we cited will be observed in practice; in the next chapters, devoted to the collections up to and including L'Air de l'Eau, particularly, considerable importance will be attached to the role played by the arbitrary, surrealist images; in the last few chapters, on Breton's poems written during and after the Second World War, we shall explore the ways in which they illustrate his exploitation of analogies and his search for signs and symbols. In addition, the various recueils and the four long poems will be examined from the thematic angle; and this approach will include further studies of all the famous Surrealist principles and concepts: "le hasard objectif", "la beauté convulsive", "le merveilleux", "le rêve", "l'amour", "la quête", "l'alchimie du verbe", to name just the most important. Not only the long poems will be analysed individually but also a selection of shorter poems from almost all the collections, so that the relationships between image and theme can be looked at in a different way and all the obvious implications of the title of this thesis will be covered.

Moreover, by the time we reach our conclusion, we should be in a position to place Breton in his true historical perspective and to show that there might be some justification for seeing



Surrealism as a poetic movement which, though in many ways new and revolutionary, took certain aspects of both Romanticism and Symbolism to their natural next phase.

## CHAPTER ONE

"MONT DE PIÉTÉ" (1919) AND OTHER PRE-SURREALIST POEMS<sup>1</sup>

The aim of this chapter is to examine Breton's first poems in an attempt to discover the nature of his earliest poetics and to find out especially whether the image plays a significant role in the poems written by Breton at the beginning of his career, before the Surrealist movement came into existence.

Although Breton has not discussed at length his conception of poetry at the time he wrote his first poems, what he has written enables one to reconstruct his pre-surrealist "art poétique".

It has been mentioned already that, when he first started writing poetry, Mallarmé was his favourite poet (v. supra, p.30); and it is the style of Mallarmé, naturally enough, which is reflected in Breton's earliest works. Breton was fifteen when he first heard one of Mallarmé's sonnets, and during the next few years, each time he tries his hand at poetry, it is the style of Mallarmé which haunts him. Much later in his life Breton stressed that his early poems were only Mallarméan in form:

"Je dis de forme car, du fait de mon inexpérience humaine, encore une fois le fond manquait." (PC 208)

The two quatrains which Henri Pastoureau publishes in his essay, Des influences dans la poésie présurréaliste d'André Breton, of a sonnet, of which the final six lines have been lost, are clearly Mallarméan. In this eight-line fragment there are a number of key-

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1. Mont de Piété, Paris: Au Sans Pareil. In this chapter we shall consider also a few inédits, poems and fragments published in Henri Pastoureau's essay, Des influences dans la poésie présurréaliste d'André Breton, in Eigeldinger, M., André Breton, Essais et Témoignages, 1970 edition, pp.45-80.

words of Mallarmé's poetry: "main", "éther", "bleu", "dentelle", "vierge", "blanc".

It is perhaps the style of Mallarmé's Chansons bas that Breton mirrors in the second inédit printed in Pastoureaux's essay. This poem, Lingères, dating from the end of 1913, is particularly reminiscent of La marchande d'herbes aromatiques and Le savetier. Again one notices the key-words, "dentelles" and "main blanche". Breton recaptures some of the delicacy and some of the playfulness of his master. The word-play and gentle humour of the third and fourth stanzas are on a par with anything Mallarmé achieved in those fields:

"....."Ma chère,  
Ouvre à son amant  
La porte cochère!  
  
Moi qui me piquais!  
(Que d'anacoluthes  
Au feu des parquets!)  
- Mon dé, si vous l'eûtes!" 1

The superb word "anacoluthes" is perhaps at the heart of the poem; Breton could hardly be insensitive to the stark contrast between the Byzantine beauty of this word and its so prosaic meaning.

The last of the three inédits is too fragmentary to give any real indication of Mallarmé's influence, being a mere couplet:

"Chaumont, ses bâches - d'une Aulis  
Ayant peu - sèvent de mes lys." 2

Largely in imitation of Mallarmé, Breton chose the sonnet-form for Hommage; <sup>3</sup> and its very subject-matter, a tribute to Vielé-Griffin,

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1. In André Breton, Essais et Témoignages, p.50.

2. id., p.51.

3. La Phalange, 93 (20 mars, 1914), pp.233-234. Reprinted along with two early prose-poems, Etude pour un portrait and Sujet, and the poems from Mont de Piété which were not included in Poèmes (1948) and Clair de Terre (1966), in the first part of André Breton, Essais et Témoignages, pp.15-26.



inevitably calls to mind Mallarmé's series of "hommages" and "tombeaux".

As we turn to the poems which were destined to be included in Mont de Piété, we find that the sonnet-form was employed, too, in Rieuse. Even though this poem, dating from 1913 and first published in the following year, was dedicated to Paul Valéry, the mark of Mallarmé is clearly stamped upon it. The preciousness of the style and language, the dislocation of normal word-order, the complexity of the syntax, certain elements of the vocabulary, all recall Mallarmé. The motifs of the "faune", the "nymphe", "la nacelle", the themes of "l'azur", "la chasteté", "la blancheur" and silence are all suggested to Breton by his reading of the author of Un Coup de Dés.

Another of these early poems is D'or vert..... :

"D'or vert les raisins mûrs et mes futiles vœux  
Se gorgent de clarté si douce qu'on s'étonne.  
Au délice ingénu de ceindre tes cheveux  
Plus belle, à n'envier que l'azur monotone.

Je t'évoque, inquiet d'un pouvoir de manteau  
Chimérique de fée à tes pas sur la terre,  
Un peu triste peut-être et rebelle plutôt  
Que toute abandonnée au glacis volontaire.

Etourdiment parjure aux promesses de fleur  
Ton col s'effile, orné de rinceaux par la treille.  
Il semble, à voir tes mains, qu'elles brodent couleur  
De feuillage une soie où te fondre, pareille.

Je sens combien tu m'es lointaine et que tes yeux,  
L'azur, tes bijoux d'ombre et les étoiles d'aube  
Vont s'éteindre, captifs du ramage ennuyeux  
Que tôt figurera ton caprice de robe." <sup>1</sup>

Once more the form, tone, style and certain of the motifs are very Mallarméan; but the opening image, with its apparently contradictory juxtaposition of colours - though in fact the two colours

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1. In André Breton, Essais et Témoignages, p.22.

merge together and "or" has a substantival force -, could be placed in the first category of surrealist images, and elsewhere there are phrases where the abstract and the concrete are seemingly brought together (e.g. "promesses de fleur"). The portrait in the poem seems to be inspired more by a painting than by a real woman, or at least this quality is given to the poem by words such as "glacis", "rinceaux" and even "ravage".

Clé de sol contains a touch, typical both of the pre-surrealist poems of Breton and of his later Surrealist texts, namely an interesting pun:

"La porte cède  
La porte c'est de la musique".<sup>1</sup>

There is already in this pun an element of distortion, which will be an essential aspect of the surreal: the unpleasant sound produced when a door gives becomes to Breton's ears the sound of music.

At the beginning of the section devoted to Les mots sans rides it was claimed that it is not clear whether this essay relates more to Breton's pre-surrealist poetics or to Surrealism (cf. supra, p.113). It will be seen in this chapter that Breton does explore in the poems of Mont de Piété various properties of words other than their meaning, and this ties in with the ideas expressed in Les mots sans rides. The clearest description of the poetics lying behind certain of the poems of Mont de Piété is given, however, in the Manifeste du Surréalisme:

"Je venais alors de tenter l'aventure poétique avec le minimum de chances, c'est-à-dire que mes aspirations étaient les mêmes qu'aujourd'hui, mais que j'avais foi en la lenteur d'élaboration pour me sauver de contacts inutiles, de contacts que je réprouvais grandement. C'était là une pudeur de la pensée dont il me reste encore quelque chose. A la fin de ma vie, je parviendrai sans doute difficilement à parler comme on parle, à excuser ma

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1. In André Breton, Essais et Témoignages, p.26.



voix et le petit nombre de mes gestes. La vertu de la parole (de l'écriture: bien davantage) me paraissait tenir à la faculté de raccourcir de façon saisissante l'exposé (puisque exposé il y avait) d'un petit nombre de faits, poétiques ou autres, dont je me faisais la substance. Je m'étais figuré que Rimbaud ne procédait pas autrement. Je composais, avec un souci de variété qui méritait mieux, les derniers poèmes de Mont de Piété, c'est-à-dire que j'arrivais à tirer des lignes blanches de ce livre un parti incroyable. Ces lignes étaient l'oeil fermé sur des opérations de pensée que je croyais devoir dérober au lecteur. Ce n'était pas tricherie de ma part, mais amour de brusquer. J'obtenais l'illusion d'une complicité possible, dont je me passais de moins en moins. Je m'étais mis à choyer immodérément les mots pour l'espace qu'ils admettaient autour d'eux, pour leurs tangences avec d'autres mots innombrables que je ne prononçais pas. Le poème FORÊT-NOIRE relève exactement de cet état d'esprit. J'ai mis six mois à l'écrire et l'on peut croire que je ne me suis pas reposé un seul jour." (M 29-30)

The secret, therefore, of these early poems by Breton lies in the use he makes of an elliptical method of construction. He selects words and phrases which convey the essence of a statement, a description, a message; his poems rely on the powers of suggestion the words and phrases possess. Breton admits that there is an exposition of ideas, but implies that he was far more interested in the vehicle of these ideas, that is to say, the words themselves. The above extract reveals clearly Breton's conception of poetry, when he was composing Mont de Piété. At the centre of his technique is the use of ellipsis. When, however, Breton speaks of the "lignes blanches" of Mont de Piété and tells how he exploited the spaces surrounding his words, one perhaps thinks more of Mallarmé's Un Coup de Dés than of Rimbaud's poems. This is undoubtedly because the typographical arrangement of Mallarmé's poem indicates in a much more blatant way than any poem of Rimbaud or even of Breton the importance attached to the blank areas surrounding the words. Breton evidently feels that there is no need to exaggerate this technique and that the written words themselves can generate the "espaces",



which conceal the "opérations de pensée" the poet wishes to keep for himself, and the "tangences avec d'autres mots innombrables" the poet has no desire to pronounce.

We propose at this point to examine the nine poems of Mont de Piété Breton chose to include in Poèmes<sup>1</sup> and which have since been published once again in the NRF Poésie edition of Clair de Terre (1966), to see how the ideas mentioned in Les mots sans rides and the extract from the Manifeste du Surréalisme are applied by Breton in the actual poems.

The apparently wilful arbitrariness of the title Mont de Piété was not appreciated by Henri Régnier, who asked "Pourquoi pas Pomme de terre?"<sup>2</sup> It would be legitimate, however, to explain the title by suggesting that Breton perhaps felt that by publishing his poems, he was almost pawning them, or even pawning part of himself.

The first of the nine poems is Façon:

"L'attachement vous sème en taffetas  
broché projets,  
sauf où le chatolement d'ors se complut.  
Que juillet, témoin  
fou, ne compte le péché  
d'au moins ce vieux roman de fillettes qu'on lut!

De fillettes qu'on  
brigua  
se mouille (Ans, store au point d'oubli), faillant  
téter le doux gave,  
- Autre volupté quel acte élu t'instaure? -  
un avenir, éclatante Cour Batave.

Etiquetant  
baume vain l'amour, est-on nanti  
de froideur  
un fond, plus que d'heures mais, de mois? Elles  
font de batiste: A jamais! - L'odeur anéantit  
tout de même jaloux ce printemps,

Mesdemoiselles." (CT 21)

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1. Paris: Gallimard, 1948.

2. v. Breton, A., Poésie & autre: Textes choisis et présentés par Gérard Legrand, Paris: Le Club du meilleur livre, 1960, p.11.

The title may suggest a parallel between dressmaking and the composition of a poem, and the rhythm, somewhat reminiscent of the intermittent whirr of a sewing-machine, reinforces this; but the basic structure can best be appreciated, when the work is read aloud, for Facon relies largely on sound repetition: homonymy (fond/font; the word "broché"), homophonic syllables (témoin/au moins), paronomasia (broché/projets; Ans store/instaure; est-on nanti/anéantit; éclatante Cour Batave/Etiquetant baume vain), plus the normal poetic devices of alliteration, assonance and rhyme, of which there are examples in this poem. Moreover the repetition of "de fillettes" provides the bridge between the first two stanzas, even though the second stanza immediately goes off at a tangent. Further word-play is present in the pun of the opening line (vous sème/vous aime), which brings together quite rationally the remaining elements of the line, "l'attachement" and "en taffetas", which are, in any case, linked by their alliteration and assonance.<sup>1</sup>

The association of words according to their meaning is reduced in this poem to a very minor role, for apart from the presence of certain motifs which are connected with the title (taffetas, batiste), the only obvious association of this kind is the linking of the periods of time in l. 16 (.....plus que d'heures mais, de mois?.....).

The poem, though extremely artificial and contrived, is of interest, when studied in the light of Breton's subsequent development, for there are already dotted about the text, like sparkling sequins, images of a rare beauty, images which prefigure images

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1. The word-play of this poem is carried on by Aragon, for in his novel Anicet, ou le panorama the name of the character based on Breton, Batiste Ajamais, is taken from a phrase in l. 17.



produced by automatic writing, "l'attachement vous sème en taffetas" and "Etiquetant baume vain l'amour", which already contain fusions of the abstract and the concrete, one of the types Breton includes in his list of surrealist images in the Manifeste.

Though the title and the preciousness are reminiscent of Mallarmé, as are some of the motifs, "le chatolement d'ors" and "taffetas", for example, on the other hand an almost indefinable presence of Rimbaud, possibly suggested by the allusion to Spring, is perceptible towards the end of the poem.

The effect of Breton's discovery of Rimbaud is more patent in the next poem, Âge, which calls to mind Rimbaud's Aube by its form, its subject and its vocabulary, though Breton's poem begins at the point in time where Rimbaud's ends. The latter's evocation of the cosmic union between the boy-poet and the dawn-goddess figure, consummated in the depths of a wood, leads directly to Breton's poem. Whereas Rimbaud's poem ends:

"L'aube et l'enfant tombèrent au bas du bois,  
Au réveil il était midi,"<sup>1</sup>

Breton's begins:

"Aube, adieu! Je sors du bois hanté; j'affronte les routes,  
croix torrides. Un feuillage bénissant me perd. L'août  
est sans brèches comme une meule." (CT 22)

The last of these sentences contains an interesting and surprising simile, which illustrates the elliptical technique mentioned in the extract from the first Manifeste. The ideas of the thickness of the wood and the heat of the summer's day are compressed into the single phrase, "L'août est sans brèches", and then the meaning of "harvest-time" which the word "août" used to possess suggests the

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1. Rimbaud, A., Poésies, Une Saison en Enfer, Illuminations (ed. Cluny), Paris: Armand Colin, 1958, p.227.



comparison with a haystack, or possibly a millstone. (Breton has no desire to dispel the ambiguity of the homonym).

Though Breton is convinced he is employing the methods used by Rimbaud, his poems are already more hermetic than those of his model, and the consequence of this is that they lack the power and the urgency which surge through the texts of Les Illuminations. The somewhat effete dexterity which is part of the delicate charm of Mallarmé's short poems is still lurking behind the Rimbaudian façade of Âge and mars the final effect. The freshness of the opening paragraph is not sustained and the end of the first section, however gentle and playful it may be, falls away a little disappointingly:

"..... Que gentiment s'ameutent les griffons au volant frisé  
des jupes!

Où la chercher, depuis les fontaines? A tort je me fie  
à son collier de bulles.

Yeux devant les pois de senteur." (ibid.)

This elliptical technique creates, however, fleeting images, which herald the images produced later by automatic writing. Yet there is a clear progression in this poem, as the setting gradually changes from nature to the world of men and women. Within this general scheme the images are very kaleidoscopic:

"Chemises caillées sur la chaise. Un chapeau de soie inaugure  
de reflets ma poursuite. Homme..... Une glace te venge et  
vaincu me traite en habit ôté. L'instant revient patiner la chair.

Maisons, je m'affranchis de parois sèches. On secoue! Un lit  
tendre est plaisanté de couronnes.

Atteins la poésie accablante des paliers." (ibid.)

This poem has been analysed at length by Mary Ann Caws. She claims that:

"Perhaps the images make more 'sense' and are more obviously linked than is the case in his later poems. Shirts thrown on a chair in heaps are not unlike clotted cream, the tightly stretched silk of his hat can reflect him as the mirror does and he has indeed taken off his shirt and hat ("habit ôté"). But "l'instant revient patiner la chair" is a good example of one of the forms of the Surrealist image Breton will later

describe, that in which an abstract thing ("l'instant") is put in a matter-of-fact combination with a tangible object ("la chair"). That the brief moment can bestow the patina of age (as in the title) to the bare flesh as if it were a statue, is as unlikely as the contrast between 'Homme' and the slightly undignified 'poursuite'." 1

Though the final example is perhaps not the most obvious case of contrast, others cited by Mrs. Caws from Âge (the contrast between the lyrical "j'affronte les routes" and the down-to-earth "On secoue", the contrast between the dry walls and the haunted woods, the switches in personality suggested by the changes from the 1st. to the 2nd. person) do prefigure the vital role played by this phenomenon in Surrealist poetry proper. Mrs. Caws writes of the "exaggerated alliterations" in this poem (Aube, adieu!; chemises, chaise, chapeau, chair; caillées, couronne; venge, vaincu; poursuite, patiner, parois, plaisanté, poésie, paliers), but the alliteration of the opening lines of the next poem in the recueil, Coqs de bruyère, is more obviously exaggerated:

"Coqs de bruyère.....et seront-ce coquetteries  
de péril  
ou de casques couleur de quetsche?" (CT 23)

This poem relies on this very rudimentary word-play for its impetus. It is the sound of the initial word "coqs" which suggests the subsequent ideas. Though the words in the above sequence are not genuine examples of paronomasia, let alone puns, and though the word-play is very trite, at least Coqs de bruyère does illustrate after a fashion the opening ideas of Les mots sans rides. The need to "considérer le mot en soi" is reflected in the exploration of homonymy. The sense of "capucines" in the final line is perhaps deliberately ambiguous:

".....sa rudesse, des maux,  
je dégage les capucines de sa lettre."

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1. Caws, M.A., The Poetry of Dada and Surrealism, p.74.

Furthermore, though Breton writes in the penultimate line "maux", the homonym "mots" would spring to mind, especially as the final words of the poem are "sa lettre". It is from this kind of word-play that the poems of Mont de Piété acquire their tone of frivolity.

For André Derain Breton retains the somewhat fragmentary technique employed in Façon, and it is one of the most difficult poems Breton has ever written. It is possible that in this poem, and indeed elsewhere in Mont de Piété, Breton is attempting to do with words more or less what Derain was doing with colour in the early years of the century. One of Derain's most famous watchwords at that time was his description of colours as "des cartouches de dynamite".<sup>1</sup> Yet more significant, however, is a passage from an essay Breton wrote about Derain:

"Voici une balle. En peinture on ne l'a jamais prise que pour une sphère, on n'a jamais donné d'elle qu'une représentation mathématique. Elle est douée pourtant de propriétés plus importantes: elle roule, posée sur un plan, elle oscille. Elle peut aussi être élastique, rebondir. Qu'aurai-je dit de la balle quand je l'aurai faite ronde? Il ne s'agit pas de reproduire un objet, mais la vertu de cet objet, au sens ancien du mot." (PP 106)

In this paragraph the third sentence is of particular interest. Just as Derain sees properties in a ball other than its spherical shape, so Breton sees in words properties other than their meaning. At two points in this essay Breton reveals that Derain relates this question to that of lyricism. (PP 105, 110)

In the poem André Derain Breton appears to be trying to produce the equivalent of a "still life" poem. The occasional motif (the "dressoir", the "pots crus") calls to mind the universe of the

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1. v. Dorival, B., Les étapes de la peinture française contemporaine, Paris: Gallimard, 1944, t. II, p.78.



studio depicted in many of Derain's canvases; the themes of creation and purity in this poem mirror the painter's preoccupations; the poem is full of allusions to colour ("un neigeux Olympe", "ces langes bleus comme un glaçon", "la rose blanche", "le ramage turquin"). Despite the presence of these themes and motifs, the poem has no obvious meaning, in the conventional sense of the term; the words stand in their own right; the poem has an air of spontaneity, the spontaneity Derain sought for painting, though it is a different kind of spontaneity from that of the later automatic texts. André Derain is somewhat reminiscent of Rimbaud's last poem, Rêve, which, curiously enough, Breton considered to be the most difficult poem in the French language (v. HN 12). It has been stated previously that at this period of Breton's life Rêve was the poem which obsessed him (cf. supra, p.31).

Rimbaud even figures in the subject-matter of the next poem, Forêt-Noire, which is inspired by his famous encounter with Verlaine in the Black Forest. The poem has been analysed in detail by Henri Pastoureau in his essay Des influences dans la poésie présurréaliste d'André Breton.

The whole poem is interpreted by Pastoureau in the light of Rimbaud's desire at that stage of his life for a sober and orderly existence. Of more interest, however, for the particular purposes of this study, are Pastoureau's comments on certain aspects of the language and imagery of the poem. Firstly Pastoureau refers to the way in which Breton uses the idea of the "chapeau melon" as the basis of an image:

"Ce faisant (encore étourdi des coups échangés) il n'évite pas, au son qu'il rend sous le doigt, de l'identifier machinalement au fruit desséché du pavot: 'tendre capsule'; mais cette image

élémentaire est immédiatement 'stoppée', ruinée dans ses ramifications éventuelles: 'etc'; et le principe de réalité exigeant que le mot 'melon' lui-même, en sa sordidité, vienne couper court à toute résonance poétique." 1

The linking of the animate and the inanimate inherent in the word "melon" is reinforced, but then the image is cut short. The "etc" clearly contributes to the elliptical effect. This device is not too far removed from the type of surrealist image, found also in the works of Rimbaud and of Mallarmé, in which one of the terms is curiously concealed.

Then Pastoureau sees in the phrase "Relief du sort" a typical feature of Mont de Piété:

"Calembour intentionnellement indigent (relief du sol) tendant à provoquer une sorte de confusion structurelle entre le temps et l'espace (le hasard et les chances observables à vol d'oiseau comme les accidents de terrain)." 2

Though, as Pastoureau admits, this example is barely a pun, it does illustrate the kind of word-association, based on sound rather than on sense, which Breton is utilising in his first recueil.

Forêt-Noire contains, too, a few of the fairly rare literary allusions, albeit undeveloped ones, to be found in Breton's poetry; there is the appropriate exclamation from Rimbaud's poem La Rivière de Cassis, "Que salubre est le vent!", and the reminder that the Comtesse de Ségur had died in 1874:

"L'auteur de l'Auberge de l'Ange Gardien  
L'an dernier est tout de même mort  
A propos." (CT 26)

It was likewise the end of an era for Rimbaud. The proximity of the University of Tübingen to the scene of the scuffle between Verlaine and Rimbaud explains the references near the end of the poem to

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1. In Eigeldinger, M., André Breton, Essais et Témoignages, p.61.  
2. ibid., p.62.

Kepler, Hegel and Wieland.

Pastoureau's interpretation of Forêt-Noire is interesting: it explains every single phrase in the poem in terms of an attempted reconstruction by Breton of Rimbaud's chain of thought immediately after his encounter with Verlaine in the Black Forest. What is perhaps important, however, is the form in which these thoughts are set down on paper. If Breton were merely interested in the chain of thoughts, they would presumably have been written down in the same form as the thoughts dictated later by the process of automatic writing. Instead they are arranged very carefully on the page, so that one realizes both the elliptical technique of the poem and the attempt to attach significance to the spaces between the phrases. Furthermore, Breton uses different kinds of type to bring out the fact that there are differences of register in the poem. The words and phrases almost become pictorial images, groups of islands on the otherwise blank page. The poem appeals to the eyes of the reader, as well as to his ears and mind. Breton will take this technique to its ultimate limit with the poem Île in Clair de Terre.

The next two poems in Mont de Piété, Pour Lafcadio and Monsieur V are written in more or less the same style. Pour Lafcadio contains fairly banal examples of punning:

"Quel ennui l'heure du cher corps  
corps accort" (CT 27)

("corps accort" could equally well have been written "corps-à-corps"),

and

"Des combattants  
qu'importe mes vers le lent train  
l'entraîn."

(Breton could not fail to notice that the same sounds "lent train/l'entraîn" evoke practically opposite ideas.)



Breton seems fascinated in this poem by the letters MA: "MAM VIVier", "Ma maîtresse", "Greffier/parlez MA langue MAternelle". For a brief moment Breton appears to be toying with a rudimentary kind of "lettrisme", which Desnos will use very cleverly in his poem P'oasis in the recueil L'Aumonyme (1923), and which Isidore Isou and others will explore more thoroughly around 1945. There is the suggestion, too, in Pour Lafcadio that Breton is considering the idea of extending to poetry the collage techniques already essayed with some success by Picasso, Braque and other Cubist painters. There is a very specific reference to it:

"Mieux vaut laisser dire  
qu'André Breton  
receveur de Contributions Indirectes  
s'adonne au collage  
en attendant la retraite."

The particular kind of "Contributions Indirectes" Breton collects is perhaps the material he acquires for his "collage-poems", of which he chooses a fine example to close his first recueil, Le Corset Mystère (cf. *supra*, p.105), (CT 32). The somewhat gratuitous manner in which the newspaper cuttings are acquired is a passive counterpart to the "acte gratuit" which preoccupied Gide.

In July 1918 Breton produced Monsieur V (CT 28), dedicated to Paul Valéry and forming the reply to the latter's request for a regular sonnet from Breton. This poem is a patent indication of Breton's refusal at that stage of his career to write in the manner of Valéry. Although he had dedicated a regular sonnet to Valéry in 1913, Breton was clearly no longer prepared to abandon his new-found techniques. Monsieur V opens with a pun:

"A la place de l'étoile  
L'Arc de Triomphe  
qui ne ressemble à un aimant que pour la forme,"

and the homonymy of "mer"/"mère" would be heard in the line

"L'enfant que chatouille la mer."

The allusion near the end of the poem to the old Twelfth Night custom, "Il s'apprête à tirer les rois", may well have inspired the subsequent phrase, "Rêve de révolutions", with its sound-repetition.

Monsieur V is, however, a poem which contains a strange mixture of styles, for though its basic form is reminiscent of Forêt-Noire, it also has snatches of a more traditional "berceuse" and the line "Pierre ou Paul" from a march. In fact, this line could be quite significant, for the Pierre and Paul in question might be Reverdy and Valéry respectively, in which case this seemingly innocuous line might represent the vital choice facing Breton at that particular moment of his career: whether he should follow the path taken by Reverdy or whether he should follow Valéry.

If Valéry's influence on Breton had prevailed, Breton might well have become the great poet, in the traditional sense of the word, of his generation. For a time Breton and Valéry were friends, though the seeds of future discord were already being sown. Breton admired La Soirée avec M. Teste and some of Valéry's early poems, notably Anne and Été. Breton was fascinated, too, by Valéry's prolonged renunciation of literature; but when Breton discovered that Valéry was writing La Jeune Parque in "Racinian" alexandrines, he was sorely disappointed. Thenceforth the conceptions that the two men had of poetry were completely different. Breton regarded the composition of La Jeune Parque as a retrograde step on the part of Valéry and was more than ever determined not to make the same "mistake" himself. He therefore stepped up his search for a kind of poetry as far removed as possible from that of Racine and Valéry.



At the end of the First World War it is the path of Reverdy rather than that of Valéry that Breton follows, though he goes much further than Reverdy along that path.

At the furthest remove from the alexandrines of Racine and Valéry is probably the prose-poem, and the next work in Mont de Piété is, significantly, such a text. The anecdote, or possibly the parable, Breton tells in Une Maison peu solide is charged with obvious symbolism. The seven-year-old boy who is rescued from the rubble, is called Lespoir. His rescuer is known in the neighbourhood as Guillaume Apollinaire, but an Apollinaire who "pouvait avoir une soixantaine d'années." (CT 31) (Apollinaire, of course, died at the age of thirty-eight, but Breton may be implying that the wartime experiences of the author of Alcools and Calligrammes had aged him to a remarkable degree.) The "maison peu solide" might represent Cubism, though this symbolic idea is probably grafted on to a real event, the collapse of a building in the Rue des Martyrs.

Breton's experiment with the prose-poem may be attributed to the influence of Reverdy, who in 1915 had published a collection of Poèmes en prose.

Moreover, Reverdy, too, was interested at that time in the possibilities offered by the isolation of words, which he often achieves in his poems by leaving large gaps between certain words and phrases. These gaps create an atmosphere of silence around the actual words of the poem. Mallarmé had already given his attention to this, of course, but one has the impression that Reverdy carried out this particular experiment with a greater intensity. The basic styles of the poems of Mont de Piété are, in fact, very similar to those of Reverdy's poems written at more or less the same period:



Poèmes en prose, La Lucarne ovale, Les Ardoises du toit, and especially Les Jockeys camouflés and La Guitare endormie, even though Breton himself seems to feel that he is writing the poems in question in imitation of the method of Rimbaud. The rudimentary word-play, which is perhaps the most important feature of the poems in Mont de Piété, is rarely in evidence, however, in Reverdy's poems.

Mont de Piété sounds out the possibilities of exploiting fairly systematically in poetry word-play (paronomasia, punning and homonymy above all) as well as the use of an elliptical technique which leaves much to the purely suggestive power of words, without trying to create imagery for its own sake. One can find the occasional example of some of the types of images Breton lists in the first Manifeste, but these images are not the important elements in Breton's first poetics. It was not until Breton read Les Chants de Maldoror that he fully realized the importance of imagery in the creation of the modern lyricism he was seeking for poetry. Though Breton may have first read Lautréamont in the latter part of 1918, the majority of the poems of Mont de Piété had been written before then. In any case, Breton could hardly be satisfied with these poems; even if they are more than rough drafts, they appear to be on the wrong track. The poet puts the emphasis on words, not even on "l'alchimie du verbe", rather than on images and themes and seems to rule out the flights of fancy which he quickly realizes are indispensable to the creation of valid lyric poetry. His discovery in 1919 of automatic writing and also the arrival in Paris a few months later of Tristan Tzara and the consequent development of the Dada movement in France lead Breton to abandon the methods employed in Mont de Piété and to place his trust in the image.

## CHAPTER TWO

### "LES CHAMPS MAGNETIQUES" (1920)

Les Champs magnétiques is the first work which can truly be called "surrealist", in the normal sense of the word; it is a series of automatic texts, produced according to the recipe given in the first Manifeste (v. supra, p.70). For the most part, they consist of pages of words and images which flow on from each other in a seemingly endless stream. The opening sections of the book, at least, come to an end each time Breton and Soupault stop writing for the day; their composition is as arbitrary as that.

Our main tasks in this chapter must be to assess the merits of automatic writing as poetry, to discuss whether the proliferation of images compensates for loss of clarity and to examine the nature of the images themselves, to see if they conform to the types Breton listed in the Premier Manifeste. We shall consider both individual chapters of Les Champs magnétiques and the work as a whole from the point of view of themes, motifs, form, style, tone and imagery, to gather sufficient evidence to make our assessment valid.

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Philippe Soupault claims that the choice of the title Les Champs magnétiques was determined suddenly one evening when he and Breton were walking in the Bois de Boulogne. It was near the Porte Maillot, where they saw in an exhibition depictions of a magnetic field, that they decided on the title for their collection of automatic texts.

The title of the recueil is by no means without significance, however; both Julian Gracq and Anna Balakian have discussed it at



length; but it is an appropriate means of evoking those mutual attractions words have for each other that Breton discusses in Les mots sans rides and particularly the way in which "distant realities", in the manner of unlike poles, are drawn together. Furthermore, the image of magnetic fields evokes the quivering convulsive beauty present in such encounters.

If we examine briefly the opening text, La glace sans tain, to discover whether it is lyrical and rich in images, we discover that it opens on a thematic note. The authors appear to be looking into a mirror, as the word "glace" is extracted from the set phrase of the title. They evoke their feeling of depression; they present themselves as prisoners in a desolate city, or even as the inmates of some vast urban zoo:

"Prisonniers des gouttes d'eau, nous ne sommes que des animaux perpétuels. Nous courons dans les villes sans bruits et les affiches enchantées ne nous touchent plus." (CM 13)

Even the cafés, where Breton, Soupault and their friends gather together, have temporarily lost their attraction:

"Il n'y a plus que ces cafés où nous nous réunissons pour boire ces boissons fraîches, ces alcools délayés et les tables sont plus poisseuses que ces trottoirs où sont tombées nos ombres mortes de la veille." (*ibid.*)

The image of viscosity has here the connotations of unpleasantness and boredom that similar images in Sartre's work possess. The adjective "délayés", in its literal sense, conveys the idea of a dilution of experience, but this is reinforced by the connotations, lurking in the background, of its figurative meaning (prolix, wordy, verbose) which make one think of idle conversations, of talking for talking's sake.

Whereas the metropolis Aragon was to describe a few years later in Le Paysan de Paris is a city of wonder, a city of never-ending



wonders, the city Breton and Soupault evoke here has lost its spell.

In reply to a question put to him in the course of one of his radio interviews with André Parinaud about his state of mind in the months immediately after the end of the First World War, Breton, more than thirty years later, had a clear recollection of his seemingly perpetual feeling of indifference and even of despair at that particular period of his life, despite the excitement his discoveries in the field of poetry and the launching of the review Littérature had undoubtedly generated in him. This is how Breton remembers his daily life in 1919:

"Je tourne pendant des heures autour de la table de ma chambre d'hôtel, je marche sans but dans Paris, je passe des soirées seul sur un banc de la place du Châtelet. Il ne semble pas que je poursuive une idée ou une solution: non, je suis en proie à une sorte de fatalisme au jour le jour, se traduisant par un 'à vau-l'eau' de nature plutôt agréable. Cela se fonde sur une indifférence à peu près totale qui n'excepte que mes rares amis, c'est-à-dire ceux qui participent à quelque titre du même trouble que moi, trouble assurément d'un genre nouveau, quoique peu objectivable." (E 51)

It would have been unusual if this despair and indifference had not found expression in the automatic texts of the period; and in La glace sans tain the note of depression heightens until finally the theme of death is introduced:

"Il n'y avait plus que la mort ingrate qui nous respectait."  
(CM 15)

One image of a river bursting its banks almost suggests that their "cup is running over":

"Ce soir, nous sommes deux devant ce fleuve qui déborde de notre désespoir." (CM 16)

Yet fighting against the meaning is the lyrical and rhythmic quality of the sentence, largely attributable to the alliteration. The despair Breton experiences at daybreak, explained in part by his insomnia, is particularly acute, and the sight of the dawn, at that point

in his life, suggests anything but the image of a beautiful woman rising from her bed, as it was to do at the end of Les Vases communi-  
cants after another period of depression:

"Mais rien n'est plus désolant que cette lumière qui coule doucement sur les toits à cinq heures du matin. Les rues s'écartent silencieusement et les boulevards s'aiment: un promeneur attardé sourit près de nous. Il n'a pas vu nos yeux pleins de vertiges et il passe doucement." (ibid.)

Breton and Soupault seem bored with the monotony of their existence. They have too much free time on their hands. The drink with friends when the day's work is done has not the same attraction - because they have no regular jobs:

"Aujourd'hui encore (mais quand donc finira cette vie limitée) nous irons retrouver les amis, et nous boirons les mêmes vins. On nous verra encore aux terrasses des cafés." (ibid.)

Their city now has a claustrophobic effect on them; its air has become almost unbreathable. The prison theme, with which the text opened, returns. The attempt to escape, by taking to the road like Rimbaud, does not succeed:

"Les paysages abondants nous ont laissé un goût amer sur les lèvres. Notre prison est construite en livres aimés, mais nous ne pouvons plus nous évader, à cause de toutes ces odeurs passionnées qui nous endorment." (CM 17)

The prison walls may be lined with favourite books, but the real nature of the poets' prison is far more intangible and, for that, more insidious. Breton and Soupault are the prisoners of habit, personified in the form of their "maîtresses délirantes". Their planet is too confined for them; to escape from their prison, they need far wider horizons:

"L'immense sourire de toute la terre ne nous a pas suffi: il nous faut de plus grands déserts, ces villes sans faubourgs et ces mers mortes." (ibid.)

After reaching this conclusion, the authors move off in another direction. An appropriate season of the year provides them with a



fresh starting-point:

"Nous touchons à la fin du carême. Notre squelette transparait comme un arbre à travers les aurores successives de la chair où les désirs d'enfant dorment à poings fermés. La faiblesse est extrême." (*ibid.*)

The *lenten* theme, with its connotation of fasting, thus serves as the basis for a grotesque visual image of a type frequently encountered in Surrealist painting, especially in the works of Dali and Magritte. A skeleton, resembling a tree in shape, shows through the flesh. The powerful effect of the visual image in the work of the Surrealist painters is obtained here by the bizarre verbal imagery, notably in the real find, "les aurores successives de la chair", in which the brilliant early morning sunlight acts like an X-ray camera, revealing just the dark silhouettes of the trees, which, if they are deciduous, would in any case be stripped of their foliage at that time of the year. This image may have some connection with the reference Breton makes in the first *Manifeste* (M 32, note 1) to Knut Hamsun's placing "sous la dépendance de la faim cette sorte de révélation", and indeed the remainder of this first section of *Les Champs magnétiques* can be interpreted in this light. The allusion to the dormant "désirs d'enfant" is, of course, the result of one of Breton's most cherished beliefs, a belief, reinforced by the reading of Freud, in the importance of the child's vision of the universe. The child can make his desire real simply by giving vent to his imagination.

From this point in the text the density of the images increases and the images themselves become more "surreal". The boredom now creates for the two men a suitable state of receptivity. A humorous element makes its appearance, as in the sentence which follows the short extract just quoted:

"Hier encore, nous glissions sur des écorces merveilleuses en passant devant les merceries." (*ibid.*)



The stock comic situation is transformed slightly, however, because the peel on which they slip is not ordinary peel; reality is now being modified.

The linguistic material, with which Breton and Soupault are working, itself becomes a source of fresh imagery in the next paragraph:

"Suspendues à nos bouches, les jolies expressions trouvées dans les lettres n'ont visiblement rien à craindre des diabolos de nos coeurs, qui nous reviennent de si haut que leurs corps sont incomptables." (CM 18)

The erstwhile stagnation has given way to movement; a cascade of words begins to assail the poets from all directions; spoken words wrapped in silver paper, conjugated verbs, puns, all descend on them, as they strike a more fruitful vein of inspiration. There follows an apparently prophetic image, suggesting death and possibly suicide:

"Un jour, on verra deux grandes ailes obscurcir le ciel et il suffira de se laisser étouffer dans l'odeur musquée de partout. Comme nous en avons assez de ce son de cloches et de faire peur à nous-mêmes!" (CM 19)

Though the motif of the wings would normally evoke a bird, it may here be inspired by the fact that in the recent combat the sky had become for the first time in history one of the theatres of war; and the musky odour may be an allusion to the use on the battlefields of poison-gas. In this respect the ringing of bells may not have here its normal connotations of tranquil Sundays.

The thought of death provokes a paragraph in which the two authors literally start to dissect their own bodies, but they discover there a surprising Surrealist tableau, again reminiscent of certain pictures by Magritte (e.g. Le Thérapeute, 1937). In the place where their hearts should be,

".... On y voit un immense lac où viennent se poser à midi des libellules mordorées et odorantes comme des pivouines. Quel est ce grand arbre où les animaux vont se regarder?" (CM 20)

This ability to "look into one's own body" may be an indication of the authenticity of the automatic writing here, for as Jean Starobinski has observed:

"Lorsque le marquis de Puységur (1751-1825), adepte fervent de Mesmer, mettait ses paysans en état de somnambulisme artificiel, ceux-ci se montraient capables de prévoir l'avenir, de diagnostiquer les maladies, de percevoir l'intérieur des corps, de désigner les remèdes efficaces....." <sup>1</sup>

Breton and Soupault are looking into their own hearts, but they are doing so literally, not metaphorically. The frontiers between the animal, the vegetable and the mineral are already being eroded away, as the bronzed dragon-flies are compared with peonies. The abstract is then merged with the concrete, for in the gory tableau Breton and Soupault also see their sins. Significantly, even in the "bleeding corridor" of their bodies the dominant colour is grey, symbolic of despair and gloom.

Yet gradually one has the impression that the metaphorical meaning is returning. The poets go on to speak of opening their arms as well as their chests, and this standard gesture of welcome seems to be an indication of their readiness to move into a receptive state, conducive to the perception of surrealist images, of which they proceed to give another example, this time a lending of the mask of the concrete to the abstract, "Il y a un crime vert à commettre." (*ibid.*)

The conclusion of this opening chapter of Les Champs magnétiques tells of a strange playlet:

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1. Freud, Breton, Myers; in Bonnet, M. (ed.), Les critiques de notre temps et Breton, Paris: Garnier, 1974, p.51.



"L'histoire rentre dans le manuel argenté avec des piqures et les plus brillants acteurs préparent leur entrée. Ce sont des plantes de toute beauté plutôt mâles que femelles et souvent les deux à la fois. Elles ont tendance à s'enrouler bien des fois avant de s'éteindre fougères. Les plus charmantes se donnent la peine de nous calmer avec des mains de sucre et le printemps arrive. Nous n'espérons pas les retirer des couches souterraines avec les différentes espèces de poissons. Ce plat ferait bon effet sur toutes les tables. C'est dommage que nous n'ayons plus faim." (ibid.)

After the initial suggestion of the closing of the book, or of the chapter, the actors are introduced. The first example of "dépaysement" comes in the fact that they are plants (once again the barriers between animal and vegetable count for nothing). Though one is surprised at first by the phrase, "souvent les deux à la fois", this does stand up to closer examination, for plants do have both male and female flowers, and though one interprets the mention of "fougères" in terms of a sudden metamorphosis, the original use of the word "plantes" does allow for it. One probably sees the image of "mains de sucre" in visual, concrete, literal terms, but in truth it is almost certainly employed figuratively. The scene is then made more surreal by the second case of "dépaysement", in the allusion to the fish, particularly as the word "souterraines" reinforces the land context.

The section comes to an end, the inspiration dries up, significantly with a series of suggestions of the end of hunger: the coming of Spring (and with it the end of the Lenten fasting), the mention of the fish on the tables and the explicit expression of regret "que nous n'ayons plus faim".

Although this opening text is very rich in surrealist imagery, it is by no means as incomprehensible as automatic texts were sometimes reckoned to be. The authors are, after all, extremely



literate men, and automatic writing merely serves to enhance and liberate their undoubted poetic gifts: it does not make them produce absolute gibberish. The most successful images here are the ones describing bizarre visual tableaux, perhaps because this is what the modern reader has been conditioned to expect of Surrealism. A number of the images merge the abstract and the concrete.

Though critics may have claimed that when one is analysing automatic texts, it is merely the imagination and the preoccupations of the reader which are brought into play, this is also true to a certain degree whenever one analyses a literary text. One cannot escape from the fact that there are in La glace sans tain, prior to the spate of surrealist images, frequent allusions to boredom, to the monotony of existence, to feelings of claustrophobia and depression; and consequently it is perfectly valid to claim that the theme of despair is very strong in this text; the two authors keep on insisting on it. It is not necessarily more difficult to extract such themes from automatic texts than from works composed in a more conventional, more deliberate manner. The sequence of ideas may not be logical, but the deep preoccupations of the authors, present in their subconscious thought as in their conscious thought, are nonetheless transcribed in these texts.

Before considering some of the general themes of Les Champs magnétiques, one should remind oneself that the problem, or the disadvantage, of studying Surrealist poetry from the thematic angle is that its vitality, its surprise and its attraction usually reside in the imagery, in the novelty of the images rather than in its themes, which can rarely be totally original; and in practice one is seldom in a position to be able to state categorically that a Breton poem

treats of such and such a theme. Therefore, ideally, some method should be found which solves this problem or overcomes this disadvantage or obstacle: it may be more profitable to explore certain qualities, e.g. transitoriness, rather than themes, but for this first series of Surrealist texts a combination of approaches is being adopted.

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We have seen that the themes of despair and death, with their claustrophobic, prison-like atmosphere, dominate the opening text. Philippe Audoin, in his very brief account of Les Champs magnétiques, writes of their "sentiment tragique de la précarité de la vie".<sup>1</sup> The prison theme returns at the end of Lune de miel (CM 81), and mention is made of prisoners in Grand luxe (CM 100), but there the effect is somewhat different. The line in question runs:

"Prisonniers graciés pour leur bonne conduite."

The pardon evokes the idea of release and this is reinforced by a subsequent allusion to "villégiatures prochaines".

The theme of death, in fact, turns out to be a constant in automatic texts and is perhaps explained by the risk of mental unbalance the technique can create, as Gérard Durozoi and Bernard Lecherbonnier suggest:

"Obsession de la mort, difficulté de réadaptation au monde quotidien consécutive à la révélation d'un monde autre où l'homme excède ses limites habituelles, tels seraient donc les ultimes aboutissements de l'automatisme." 2

Breton and Soupault seem able to combat this threat, however,

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1. Audoin, P., Breton, p.184.

2. Le Surréalisme: théories, thèmes, techniques, Paris: Larousse, 1972, pp.106-107.



in Les Champs magnétiques by making imaginary flights from the capital. The desire to escape from the gloom of Paris may well be the subconscious motivation for the nostalgic reminiscences of the carefree days of childhood in the second text of the book, Saisons, which begins with a very patent evocation of the world of the child:

"Je quitte les salles Dolo de bon matin avec grand-père." (M 23)

(It is worth noting that, for the first four years of his life, Breton lived with his maternal grandfather at Saint-Brieuc).

The recollections of childhood are followed by recollections of school, but occasionally the adult, the poet, intervenes, to reproduce faithfully his train of thought:

"Debout sur la grande balançoire sombre, j'agite mystérieusement un feuillard de laurier. (Cela vient du temps où l'on m'asseyait sur les genoux)." (CM 24)<sup>1</sup>

Soon, however, the text goes off at a tangent and the original inspiration is left behind.

A different kind of escape, travel, is suggested by the fourth text, En 80 jours, for which Phineas Fogg's journey around the world in Jules Verne's novel is the obvious source. A rather mysterious traveller-figure is introduced in the very first paragraph, but the interest of the passage lies not so much in him, for he is never developed as a character, as in certain features of the imagery, as will be demonstrated shortly. Later in the book the text entitled Gants blancs (CM 87) takes up again the theme of travel, together with the idea of loneliness and the familiar setting of night in a deserted city and references to hotels, stations and boulevards, but

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1. With reference to this Durozoi and Lecherbonnier, in André Breton: l'écriture surréaliste, p.214, cite the note Breton added in the margin of the first copy of Les Champs magnétiques (published in Change, No.7): "Mon plus lointain souvenir d'enfance, c'est vrai."



in addition, the travel-theme is accompanied there by the appearance of a motif which recalls inevitably one of the stranger motifs of Apollinaire's poetry, the "mannequin sans tête". In Gants blancs the headless dummies are two travellers, possibly Breton and Soupault themselves. These dummies are in turn transformed from day to day, as they are fitted with new outfits, and this gives rise to touches of humour as well as to the theme and the process of metamorphosis.

Lune de miel (CM 81) suggests a degree of tension between newly-weds, as they undergo some self-questioning, as they attempt to adjust to each other, as they discover sources of possible friction:

"Il y a des jalousies plus touchantes les unes que les autres. La rivalité d'une femme et d'un livre, je me promène volontiers dans cette obscurité."

One can assume that this text was written by Breton,<sup>1</sup> not by Soupault, as it was included by Breton in 1948 in his anthology, Poèmes, though it cannot refer to his own honeymoon, for he did not marry his first wife, Simone, until September 1921 and did not even meet her until July 1920. In his early writings Breton was so reticent about his private life at this early period of his career that it is exceedingly difficult to consider a text such as Lune de miel in autobiographical terms.

Some indication of themes and motifs is given by certain of the chapter headings. Most of the texts of Les Champs magnétiques are given a title, and we have seen already that the titles are not always altogether gratuitous. At least they occasionally provide the poets with points of departure and often provide, too, fresh motifs which sustain the inspiration. The motif of the "porte"

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1. This is confirmed by M. Bonnet in André Breton, Naissance de l'aventure surréaliste, Paris: Corti, 1975, p.167.

suggested by the title of the section, Barrières, does occur fairly frequently in the text, but it is never really explored in depth. Hôtels (M 76) is built partly around motifs inspired by the title (the sound of music, a commissionnaire, deserted boulevards) and partly around the themes of the night and the sea, which likewise have associations with it. Trains begins with a perfectly orthodox description of a train speeding along the track:

"Les talus se fendillent sous la chaleur des wagons rapides et des escarbilles rouges de toute la vapeur qui coule loin sur les arbres." (CM 78)

The title of the third text, Eclipses, is reflected in the images built around stars, meteors and planets:

"La mer tourmentée illuminait ces régions; une végétation instantanée disparut et des agglomérations de vapeurs découvrirent les astres. Activité céleste pour la première fois explorée. Les planètes s'approchaient à pas de loup et des silences obscurs peuplaient les étoiles." (CM 36) <sup>1</sup>

The settings of Détour par le ciel (CM 103) and Les Jeunes Pousses (CM 104) are respectively a church, with allusions to communion, mass, prayers, and a theatre - mention is made of footlights, the rail, the stage and national anthems.

A good part of the interest these texts arouse resides in the weird bestiary they create and describe. The "surreal" universe teems with life, resembling a vast and wonderful zoo which houses hundreds of hybrid beasts, prehistoric and futuristic, fruit of the animate and the inanimate, of the abstract as well as the concrete. Such creatures are possibly the most vital elements in the visual imagery of Surrealist texts. Eclipses ends with the description of a superb Surrealist tableau containing bizarre, exotic animals:

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1. Simone's copy of the first edition, which is marked to show which parts were written by Breton and which by Soupault, indicates that these images come from the pen of the latter, however. Hôtels and Trains were written by Soupault; v. Bonnet, M., André Breton, Naissance de l'aventure surréaliste, pp.167-168.



"des éléphants à têtes de femmes", "des lions volants" and crocodiles which "se reprennent la valise faite avec leur peau" (CM 42). This is the birth of a Surrealist mythology, perhaps more marvellous than those of many ancient and primitive peoples. At times one is reminded of the strange fauna of Les Chants de Maldoror, as, for example, in a sequence near the end of En 80 jours:

"Les cycles des ombres perdues et la moire cultivée des cieux marins n'existaient plus pour ce voyageur que rien n'effrayait: les éléments tendrement énergiques, les animaux que la cruauté divinise: poissons-lunes des profondeurs océaniques, crapauds chatoyants des buissons creux, oiseaux bercés de cris." (CM 54)

The vitality, the violence and the sadism of life, both marine and terrestrial, which are the hallmarks of Lautréamont's major work, are recaptured in this passage. In Trains (CM 78), the reader is prepared for the eventual crossing of the animate and the inanimate: there is the suggestion of wild beasts in the depiction of trains, in the allusions to "cette odeur des loups morts de faim qui vous prend à la gorge dans les wagons des classes inférieures", to "ces cris des locomotives hystériques", to the "gémissements des rouées suppliciées" and in the presence at every signal of "une énorme bête". The comparison between a locomotive and a dragon, based on the roar and the belching of smoke, is fairly traditional, but Breton, Soupault and other Surrealist poets interpret such comparisons very literally and convert them into metaphors.

The final two sections of Les Champs magnétiques are both entitled Le pagure dit. "Le pagure" ("hermit-crab" or "soldier-crab") is a strange animal with a soft, spiral body which shelters in the discarded shell of a whelk or a similar sea-creature. When it outgrows one shell, it removes to a larger one. The following explanation of the significance of the words "le pagure dit" is given by



Philippe Audoin:

"Le pagure dit: sous-titre de la dernière partie de l'ouvrage, paraît, par le choix d'un animal qui habite précisément une coquille qui n'est pas la sienne, vouloir insister sur le caractère étranger des propos tenus. Ce sentiment d'une altérité intérieure fondamentale ne va du reste pas sans le soupçon que cet autre qui parle à la place du sujet pourrait bien dire plus vrai que ce dernier, en savoir plus long sur ce qui le concerne réellement, selon que le veut l'hypothèse psychanalytique à laquelle Breton s'est expressément référé en tentant de se soumettre lui-même au discours automatique."<sup>1</sup>

This explanation is plausible. What is certain, however, is that the motifs of shells and crustaceans will be found time and time again in Breton's poetry, as will references to other marine life: sea-urchins (Au beau demi-jour de 1934, Fata Morgana, Cours-les-toutes); cuttlefish (Premiers transparents); sea-anemones (Les attitudes spectrales), to name but a few examples. This is likewise part of the universe of Tanguy's paintings, and one is reminded of Breton's comment on Tanguy:

"Avec lui nous entrons pour la première fois dans un monde de latence totale." (SP 173)

This is, in fact, also the world of Breton's own poetry, and the primeval shellfish is the archetypal symbol of that world. The real submarine universe itself becomes a veritable dream-world for certain of the Surrealists.

The short poem, Terre de couleur (CM 105), operates on a much smaller canvas: it gives quite literally a worm's eye view of the world; its principal characters are worms, earwigs and moles. Once again the secret of the poem resides in its novel standpoint: the poet takes a fresh look at the world and his fertile imagination expresses what he sees in terms of new images. The worms see crystal barges drawn by moles. Such novel standpoints may begin to explain why almost any selection of motifs in Les Champs magnétiques must be

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1. Audoin, P., Breton, p.185.

arbitrary, even though one can quickly detect the work's obvious themes.

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As far as the form of the texts in Les Champs magnétiques is concerned, one finds that it varies considerably, though they are all ostensibly the products of automatic writing. There are long prose-sections, reminiscent of the strophes of Les Chants de Maldoror, short prose-poems, texts set out as poems in free verse, and isolated sentences, the form of which suggests maxims or aphorisms.

The fairly long prose passage will gradually become established as the normal form for the automatic text, as for the récit de rêve. One could scarcely expect it to be otherwise, when conditions are favourable to the "dictée de la pensée" and when there is a rich vein of inspiration. One is perhaps surprised, however, to discover in Les Champs magnétiques texts set out as poems in free verse. This seems to imply some deliberate, conscious arrangement of the material, though this may not necessarily be the case. The section of the book entitled Ne bougeons plus ends with a short piece in italics, arranged in the form of a poem and prefiguring the form of Le pagure dit. This little piece, Les oiseaux de menuisier..... (CM 85-86), suggests a return to Breton's earlier style; it is fragile and ethereal and rather elliptical; the lace-motif makes a reappearance; there is a gentle exploitation of phonic qualities: repetition of syllables, alliteration and assonance:

"Reprendre la chanson de gestes  
aut tant rire  
du rectangle réclame  
aux eaux minérales et aux fleurs". (CM 86)

Such poems are, however, little more than exercises or experiments.



Even though they are sometimes humorous, they are very slight. Breton and Soupault appear to be testing in a very gingerly manner the conversion of automatic texts into proper poems. Similarly many of the ingenious texts of L'Aumonyme and Langage cuit are little more than preparatory exercises before Desnos discovers his own particular style and writes his best poems, beginning with the recueil, A la Mystérieuse.

The poems in the second half of Le pagure dit resemble the results obtained by the Dada method of producing poems.<sup>1</sup> Very often they do little more than show off the extensive vocabulary - frequently very "recherché" - of the two men; occasionally they hit on simple truths ("la biologie enseigne l'amour") or strange metaphors ("l'acétylène est un oeillet blanc"), but simple equations of this order, by themselves, do not really suffice.

1. In his Sept Manifestes Dada Tzara gives his recipe Pour faire un poème dadaïste:

"Prenez un journal  
Prenez des ciseaux  
Choisissez dans ce journal un article ayant la longueur que vous comptez donner à votre poème  
Découpez l'article  
Découpez ensuite avec soin chacun des mots qui forment cet article et mettez-les dans un sac  
Agitez doucement  
Sortez ensuite chaque coupure l'une après l'autre dans l'ordre où elles ont quitté le sac  
Copiez consciencieusement  
Le poème vous ressemblera."

(Tzara, T., Sept Manifestes Dada, Paris: Pauvert, 1963, p.77; but published in Littérature in 1920).

It is only a game, of course, but it is a game with a more serious side to it, for it tied in with the ideas of Breton's essay Les mots sans rides. The Dada poems composed in this way liberate the word from the restrictions normally imposed upon it by reason. In the light of the developments which took place in the ensuing years, these Dada poems are important. Tzara was fully aware of this. In the fourth number of the review Le Sur-réalisme au service de la révolution (1931) he discussed the question of Dada and language in the following terms: "Si Dada n'a pu se dérober au langage, il a bien constaté les malaises que celui-ci causait et les entraves qu'il mettait à la libération de la poésie". (op.cit., Essai sur la situation de la poésie). The Dada poems, composed in accordance with Tzara's instructions, give free scope to the arbitrary.



A couple of more traditional stanzas, of which we quote the first, in Commandements, suggest a children's song, where the sound-effects counteract snatches of nonsense:

"Le joli sang est une rose  
Un éventail de reflets  
La couleur du lait repose  
A cet occident de richesses." (CM 118)

It is not just the rhyme, the rhythm or the alliteration, which gives this quatrain a lyrical quality; it is above all in the imagery, the metaphors, of the first two lines, in the spasmodic "dépassement de l'expression contrôlée" that the lyricism resides. The blood and the flower are obviously linked first of all by their colour, but the play of light on the blood mirrors the changing hues of the rose-petals as they gradually open and sway in the breeze, as a fan opens and closes and is gently waved. This image, though subtle and attractive, becomes quite transparent, and the allusion to the fan is possibly a hark back to Mallarmé.

Philippe Audoin claims that the overall tone of Les Champs magnétiques is somewhat detached, "comme il convient à un discours dont les auteurs ne sauraient se tenir pour pleinement 'responsables'".<sup>1</sup> This remark certainly holds true for some of the texts, especially for the humorous passages. It is less valid as far as the oneiric sequences are concerned. An important part of En 80 jours is devoted to the dreams and nightmares of the traveller, and the following short extract is an illustration of its very vivid style:

"Les rêves se tiennent par la main: habits des femmes écorchées, soupirs des oiseaux morts de faim, cris des bateaux de bois, profondeur des précipices sous-marins. Un poisson à la chevelure souillée glisse entre les bras des plantes. Un mollusque effrayé

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1. Breton, p.184.

jette un regard sur toute l'eau qui le baigne pour y découvrir son sauveur." (CM 47)

The traveller passes constantly shifting scenes, described in a seemingly endless flow of images. The text resembles a series of récits de rêves. Possibly the two different Surrealist techniques, automatic writing and dream-narration, are here fused together. The end of the chapter is, moreover, like the end of a dream; its image of a clearing in a submarine forest evokes a waking person's sudden awareness of daylight.

The method of composition employed in the section entitled Barrières is somewhat different from that used in the rest of the book. It consists of a dialogue between Breton and Soupault, but it is a dialogue of a particular kind. Breton has explained how the section was written:

"Chacun d'eux (les deux interlocuteurs) poursuit simplement son soliloque, sans chercher à en tirer un plaisir dialectique particulier et à en imposer le moins du monde à son voisin. Les propos tenus n'ont pas, comme d'ordinaire, pour but le développement d'une thèse, aussi négligeable qu'on voudra, ils sont aussi désaffectés que possible. Quant à la réponse qu'ils appellent, elle est, en principe, totalement indifférente à l'amour-propre de celui qui a parlé. Les mots, les images ne s'offrent que comme tremplins à l'esprit de celui qui écoute." (M 44)

Certain of the remarks of one speaker are taken up by the other, but this happens only spasmodically, as is the case in the following sequence:

"Je ne sais pas où vous voulez m'entraîner. Je me défie un peu de vos pelures d'oranges comme autant de petits arcs-en-ciel que vous avez fait tomber dans les cours." (CM 69-70)

The idea of "arc" is taken up and modified:

"Ce sont des Arcs de Triomphe et vous pouvez jouer au cerceau."

This interesting example of a word almost taking over leads us into a study of the ways in which this book reveals

or explores the basic ideas of Les mots sans rides.

\* \* \* \* \*

Though the texts of Les Champs magnétiques normally respect, at least on the surface, the conventions and rules of grammar and syntax, on occasions they, too, are assailed, as in the sentence:

"Raide tige de Suzanne inutilité surtout village de saveurs  
avec une église de homard." (CM 39)

There is here a modification of conventional relationships between words. The connection between this device and the task set in the opening sentences of the essay Les mots sans rides is very clear, and the sentence has the air of a "cadavre exquis". Furthermore, the isolated example of the modification of a single word is to be found in Les Champs magnétiques. In the attempt to recreate the child's vision of the world in Saisons, the poet gives the following authentic instance of the way in which a child is struck by the curious things he hears:

"Les mendiants prononçaient le châtieau." (CM 23)

Hence, within the context of the desire to reproduce faithfully the subconscious voice, there is a faithful reproduction of what the child actually hears the beggars say.

There is more orthodox word-play at the beginning of the short poem, N'a jamais eu de commencement, both in the title, whose sense is reflected in the absence of a true syntactical beginning and in the opening lines:

"Tuiles huile file serpe  
A coups de hache le président se couvre  
Il va falloir se mettre à l'abri". (CM 99)

The relationships of sound between words as well as those of meaning are further explored here, though admittedly not very deeply. In



Grand Luxe there is a good example of Surrealist word-play in the style of Rose Sélavy:

"Papier d'étain non papier déteint". (CM 150)

This example of a pun may have been created by one of the two men correcting his original orthography of the phrase dictated by his subconscious voice, but he is right to insist on the difference, since "papier d'étain" (silver paper) and "papier déteint" (faded, discoloured paper) are almost opposite in their basic qualities.

The poem Au seuil des tours ends with an example of paronomasia:

"Pour vos étamines perdues Etat-major  
des éternités froides." (CM 121)

Once again the poets cannot ignore the links between words established by certain similarities of sound. There is simple word-play or the concept of words "making love" towards the end of the final poem Les masques et la chaleur colorée (CM 122-3), when the reference to "la basilique des secondes effrayées" provokes the word "le basilic" two lines further on. Thus the word-play which was a basic feature of the poems of Mont de Piété is continued in the automatic texts of Les Champs magnétiques, but whereas the word-play of the former was the fruit of very careful deliberation, that of the latter is quite spontaneous and unpremeditated.

One is further reminded of the ideas of the opening sentences of Les mots sans rides by the completely gratuitous juxtaposition of words and phrases which is an interesting characteristic of Les Champs magnétiques. The entire final poem is little more than an assembly of largely unconnected phrases; the four principal texts of the section Ne bougeons plus are surrounded by a number of Surrealist sentences, all isolated from one another and resembling the sentences produced by the "jeu du cadavre exquis". One rather sacrilegious

example, built on an allusion to the height of Mont Blanc,

"La volonté de grandeur de Dieu le Père ne dépasse pas  
4.810 mètres en France, altitude prise au-dessus du niveau  
de la mer" (CM 82),

recalls the famous allusion in Apollinaire's poem Zone to Christ's  
ascension into Heaven:

"C'est le Christ qui monte au ciel mieux que les aviateurs  
Il détient le record du monde pour la hauteur."

Yet more reminiscent of the sentences produced by the "jeu  
du cadavre exquis" are the strange lines in Eclipses (CM 38),  
"Saintement cathédrale vertébré supérieur" and "pneus pattes de  
velours".

In the middle of sometimes sober meditations the poets throw  
in an apparently gratuitous humdrum observation, as in Lune de miel:

"Dans quelque train que ce soit, il est dangereux de se pencher  
par la fenêtre." (CM 81)

Even this casual remark may acquire, however, a more symbolic signi-  
ficance, as the idea of looking out of the window of a train may  
suggest the ideas of looking outwards on the world again or of  
looking towards the future.

Another indication of the Surrealists' study of basic aspects  
of language is the interest they take in proverbial expressions;  
sometimes they seek to modify them, sometimes they leave them as  
they are. The evocation of childhood in Saisons is interrupted by  
reflections on such an expression:

"Quand l'eau n'est pas troublée (troubler l'eau nuit, paresser  
dans ce monde) on voit jaillir des pierres les parcelles d'or  
qui fascinent les crapauds." (CM 23-24)

Proverbial expressions, perhaps because of the presence in them of  
somewhat unusual, if only archaic, linguistic features, are seen  
by Breton as a source of imagery; and it is fitting that this brief



consideration of the connections between Les Champs magnétiques and Les mots sans rides should introduce our examination of the imagery of this first Surrealist work.

\* \* \* \* \*

The imagery proper of Les Champs magnétiques is very important, however, both for the effect it has on Breton's thought, confirming his new belief in the spontaneous, the irrational, the marvellous, the role of the subconscious mind in inspiration and artistic creation, the receptivity of the artist to such inspiration, and for its nature, based on qualities of surprise, arbitrariness and the bringing together of "distant realities".

Although Surrealist painting may score over Surrealist poetry in the vividness and the surprise of its visual imagery, the poetry has perhaps a greater depth, in that it gives more scope to sense-expressions other than the purely visual and also integrates them all with abstract concepts. In Surrealist art the titles have to provide the abstract dimension. The fusion of the abstract and the concrete, as we have pointed out already, is a frequent feature of the imagery of Surrealist poetry. The third text of Les Champs magnétiques, Eclipses, contains a particularly high density of such images, as the following sentences reveal:

"Le promontoire de nos péchés originels est baigné des acides légèrement colorés de nos scrupules vaniteux; la chimie organique a fait de si grands progrès." (CM 33)

In this quotation the afterthought, the final phrase, provides a clue to a possible rational explanation of the image in the first part of the sentence. The progress made in organic chemistry explains the poet's use of the image of acids in a moral context. Yet although the allusion to the promontory has the effect of suggesting



that the sins are thrown into relief, the attraction of the first concrete/abstract image in this sentence, "le promontoire de nos péchés originels", resides as much as anything in its alliteration.

One of the more important types of hallucinatory image fuses the visual with the aural, and such an image brings the traveller-figure back into the picture in En 80 jours:

"On entend chaque soir un bruit sombre qui passe douloureusement pour nos oreilles fatiguées; c'est ce voyageur amaigri qui s'assoit sur le bord d'un fossé." (CM 46-47)

Although strictly the aural image precedes the visual image in the text, the former, in fact, blends into the latter, and the sound is identified with its source. In such a context, the subsidiary aspect of the image, the synaesthesia of "bruit sombre", possibly based on the more hackneyed "nuit sombre", is almost eclipsed by the apparent metaphor created by the association of "bruit" and "voyageur". The scenery changes constantly and in addition to the visual images in this text the poets are able to evoke surreal sounds and smells.

Occasionally in Les Champs magnétiques one encounters examples of the negation of an elementary physical property. In Barrières there is the statement:

"Les rivières sont tarées sur terre et dans les cieux." (CM 61)

In Langage cuit Desnos was to construct an entire poem, Un jour qu'il faisait nuit, using this device, which must be almost as old as poetry itself. One can simply accept the remark in Barrières at its face-value, yet it could have a deeper, metaphysical significance. Probably the second half of the sentence, which constitutes the surrealist image, is just an afterthought jotted down for good measure.

Likewise in the classification of surrealist images in the first Manifeste Breton includes the image of apparent contradiction; and at the end of a particularly fine sustained image describing a flotilla of airships which appear in the sky, one finds a case in point:

"Ces rois de l'air adoptent une constitution nécessaire de brouillards et les tribunes s'ouvrent devant l'archevêque jaune qui a l'arc-en-ciel pour crosse et une mitre de pluie ensoleillée." (CM 39)

The reader is prepared, of course, for the image of "la pluie ensoleillée" by the earlier reference to the rainbow, yet it is still a surprising phrase and a pleasing image. The evocation of the sun in terms of "l'archevêque jaune", though perhaps a little forced, adds a mildly humorous note to the scene. The allusion to an archbishop is presumably inspired by the earlier cliché, "ces rois de l'air". The principle of association of ideas is at work in the creation of this image.

On the fringe of the imagery proper of Les Champs magnétiques is the attempt to integrate mathematical equations into verbal images. In Barrières, for instance, there are the following sentences:

"L'équation de la pudeur des femmes est autrement difficile. J'ai rencontré une jeune femme qui portait  $x^2+2ax$  sur son coeur. Cela lui allait à ravir." (CM 61)

This may stem from the admiration Lautréamont had for mathematics, as testified by the famous strophe in Les Chants de Maldoror, beginning "O mathématiques sévères.....," but whereas Lautréamont saw in mathematics the perfect symbol of the order he esteemed so highly, the Surrealists see mathematics in a different light; Desnos wanted at one time to try to make poetry a branch of mathematics, as an explanatory note in Fortunes reveals:

"..... Je voudrais reprendre des études mathématiques et physiques délaissées depuis un quart de siècle, apprendre cette belle langue. J'aurais alors l'ambition de faire de la 'Poétique' un chapitre des mathématiques. Projet démesuré certes, mais dont la réussite ne porterait préjudice ni à l'inspiration, ni à l'intuition, ni à la sensualité. La Poésie n'est-elle pas aussi science des nombres?"<sup>1</sup>

Unfortunately Desnos does not appear to have achieved very much or advanced very far with this project, but he also tried to pun with numbers.<sup>2</sup> Péret was to build a poem, 26 points à préciser,<sup>3</sup> around algebraic equations of ever-increasing complexity. These attempts to blend the language of mathematics into the language of poetry are not at all successful. Although in theory they may bring together distant realities, they do not create interesting and valid images.

\* \* \* \* \*

Indeed, not by any stretch of the imagination can Les Champs magnétiques be called an unqualified success. The authors themselves noticed at once that the texts they had produced were different from the works of writers they particularly admired (Lautréamont above all). Although neither Breton nor Soupault could fail to be struck by the torrent of images, Soupault claims that Breton was more astonished by the "humour involontaire et insolite qui, au détour d'une phrase, jaillissait."<sup>4</sup>

When Aragon and Fraenkel were allowed to read the texts, these two friends of Breton were, as Soupault puts it:

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1. Desnos, R., op.cit., Paris: Gallimard (Coll. 'Poésie'), 1969, p.166.
  2. Desnos, R., Corps et Biens, p.65; the poem Art rythmé tic  
Lit temps nie.
  3. Péret, B., Le grand jeu, Paris: Gallimard (Coll. 'Poésie'), 1969, pp.83-6.
  4. André Breton et le mouvement surréaliste, NRF, April 1967, p.665.



".....je n'ose pas écrire enthousiasmés, mais choqués, bouleversés." <sup>1</sup>

Quite recently Aragon, too, has recalled his initial and his subsequent reactions to this curious, but highly significant work:

"André était très curieux de savoir si je reconnaissais ce qui était de lui et ce qui était de Philippe..... Avec la distance, une certaine unité s'est établie: Les Champs magnétiques sont devenus l'oeuvre d'un seul auteur à deux têtes, et le regard double a seul permis à Philippe Soupault et André Breton d'avancer sur la voie où nul ne les avait précédés, dans ces ténèbres où ils parlaient à voix haute. Ainsi surgit ce texte incomparable - qu'il nous faut bien tenir aujourd'hui, comme j'en eus alors le pressentiment avant même qu'il eût été achevé - pour le moment, à l'aube de ce siècle où tourne toute l'histoire de l'écriture, non point le livre par quoi voulait Stéphane Mallarmé que finit le monde, mais celui par quoi tout commence." <sup>2</sup>

Even though the book may not be as "incomparable" as Aragon claims, it certainly has historical importance, being the first literary manifestation of the Surrealist movement.

Clifford Browder has raised an interesting and very pertinent point, however, concerning the "purity" of Les Champs magnétiques:

"..... one is tempted to ask how pure this automatism really is. Without questioning the fundamental sincerity of the authors, one may observe that the deliberate variations of the forms and speed of transcription already represents a concession to conscious control, and perhaps also to aesthetic considerations. Breton even admits having proposed corrections of certain passages that seemed 'mal venu', but states that Soupault opposed this vigorously. Moreover, since Breton has said that the first day's experiment in automatic writing yielded some fifty pages of material, and that he and Soupault wrote daily, often for hours at a time, it seems likely that this volume of one hundred and twenty pages represents only a modest portion of their output. If so, one is curious to know on what grounds the authors selected some texts in preference to others for publication." <sup>3</sup>

This question has never been answered categorically either by Breton or by Soupault. One possible explanation is that Les Champs

1. André Breton et le mouvement surréaliste, NRF, April 1967, p.666.
2. Aragon, L., in Les Lettres françaises, May 1968; reprinted in Audoin, P., Breton, p.17.
3. Browder, C., André Breton, Arbiter of Surrealism, p.79.

magnétiques is merely the result of the experiments of the first few days. The first argument which would support this theory is a rather ambiguous phrase in Entrée des médiums:

" 'Les Champs magnétiques' ne sont que la première application de cette découverte." (PP 150)

The second is that the first three chapters of the book - the fruit of the first three days of the experiment perhaps - appeared first of all in Littérature between the months of October and December 1919, and other chapters or sections of Les Champs magnétiques were also published separately. Some of the remaining material may never have been published. Furthermore, according to Soupault, they agreed to work for a fortnight, whereas Breton claims they worked for two months.

Although Les Champs magnétiques may not have fully lived up to Breton's expectations, and although the text nowadays may disappoint the average reader, Breton was not deterred. The imagery and the humour of the book were sufficient for him to wish to continue the experiment later and also to use automatic writing as a starting-point for more deliberately composed poems. Automatic writing certainly plays a large part in the new poems published in Clair de Terre in 1923. At least automatic writing generates vast quantities of the types of images Breton in the Manifeste was to describe as "surrealist" images. Breton had come to accept that they were the keys to the new lyricism he sought for modern poetry.